

# Giving to the Lord's Work

M. W. Bassford, 12-7-14

Sometimes, my sermons have obscure origins. This one, though, is pretty straightforward. It arose as a result of the last men's meeting. In that meeting, Jeff reported that our bank balance was continuing to decline. We weren't in any danger of having the lights cut off in the middle of Sunday services yet, but if the trend continued, we were going to have to reduce the number of outside preachers we support. As part of the solution to the problem, I volunteered to preach a sermon concerning giving.

Since that meeting, however, a remarkable thing has happened. I've often had my intentions frustrated by people not doing what they should, but this time, they were frustrated by people who started doing what they should. Over the past couple of months, our contribution has been near or over budget every week, and I can't very well get up and say to y'all, "We haven't been meeting our budget," when the number on the board to the left very clearly says otherwise!

However, it's still appropriate for us to consider the subject of giving. Even if for now it looks like we're going to be able to meet all our commitments, we can't slack off three months from now and act like the problem has gone away. Similarly, more income for the church will enable us to do more good. The men here receive letters all the time from preachers who need more support, and indeed are worthy of more support. We have to turn them away, but if our contribution were better, we would be able to help more in the spread of the gospel. For these reasons, then, let's look at giving to the Lord's work.

## Two Examples

Our text this morning will be 2 Corinthians 8-9, a two-chapter chunk of the Bible that has the collection for the saints as its main subject. Within this context, the first section concerns two examples of generosity that Paul holds up for the attention of the Corinthians. The first example comes from **THE CHURCHES OF MACEDONIA**. Let's read from 2 Corinthians 8:1-5. What an example these Macedonian Christians are, both to the brethren in Corinth, and even, 2000 years later, to us! As Paul says, these aren't rich folks. Regardless, these poverty-stricken Macedonians were so determined to help other Christians that they begged Paul for the chance to contribute, and they gave more than they could afford.

You've often heard me quote my father as saying, "People always find time to do what they want to do." On the basis of the example of the Macedonians, I think it's equally fair to say that people always find the money to do what they want to do. Perhaps the most common excuse for lackluster contributions is, "I would like to give more, but I can't afford it right now." In some cases, I've heard that from people who had six figures' worth of household income, but somehow couldn't scrape together more than a few dollars every week to put in the plate. Well. . . Let's be honest with ourselves, brethren. If this is the excuse that we're making to ourselves, is it really true that we don't have the money? Or is it true instead that we have the money, but we're spending it on so many other things that we don't have any left for the Lord?

Paul then urges the Corinthians to be like the Macedonians, **ABOUNDING IN GRACE**. Look at 2 Corinthians 8:6-7. Sometimes, I think we have a distorted view of our offering to the Lord. We think that because it involves money, it's somehow dirty and shouldn't be talked about. Likewise, we think that it's not very important, that we can be five-star disciples without being five-star givers.

In reality, neither one of these beliefs is accurate. There are five things we do in our assemblies each Lord's day, things we often call the five acts of worship. In the Scripture, of those five acts, we have more instruction about preaching than we do any of the other four. In second place, though, is the contribution. The Bible says more about the collection than about the Lord's Supper, prayer, or singing. We might not think of giving to the Lord's work as very important, but the Holy Spirit clearly does!

Also, let's pay attention to the comparison that Paul makes here. He says that the Corinthians abound in faith, speech, knowledge, diligence, and love. The importance of those things is obvious. Every one of us who has been to church more than twice knows that Christians are supposed to abound in love. Paul wants the Corinthians to understand, though, that it's just as important for them to abound in giving.

The point is, I think, that just as abundant faith, abundant knowledge, and abundant love are signs of spiritual maturity, so too is abundant giving. As the Lord Himself said, where our treasure is, our heart will

be there also, and if we will only glance through our check registers and credit-card statements for the past month, those things will tell us an awful lot about our hearts. We might not like what they are saying about our hearts, but they are speaking truly. If we are truly committed to being the best Christians we can be, that commitment will manifest itself in our abundant generosity, and if it doesn't, we need to make some changes.

Finally in this section, Paul points to the greatest example of all, the example of **CHRIST**. Let's consider 2 Corinthians 8:8-9. As always, we must stand ashamed before the cross. When it comes to generosity, who in all of history has ever been more generous than Jesus? All of us recognize that money is important, but we also recognize that some things are even more important. In Job 2, the devil, who is a pretty astute judge of human character, observes that a man will give everything he has in exchange for his life. Jesus, however, didn't merely surrender everything He had in heaven. He surrendered His very life.

In just a few moments, we're going to partake of the Lord's Supper. As we do, let's first of all consider Jesus and His willingness to sacrifice everything so that we could enjoy spiritual riches in Him. How great a love He had and has for us, that He would be willing to give so much! Let's also, though, do a discipleship check. How are we doing at following in the footsteps of our Lord? How close do we come to His generosity, to giving like He gave, not merely of our money, but of everything? This is certainly a subject worthy of sober and humbling reflection. Let's reflect on it now as we partake.

### **The Mechanics of Giving**

The second and predominant part of Paul's discussion concerns the mechanics of giving. According to Paul, this must start with **GOOD INTENTIONS**. Consider 2 Corinthians 8:10-12. Here we see that in urging the Corinthians to give, Paul was urging them to do something they already wanted to do. He was simply encouraging them to be their best selves rather than their worst.

Without this, without the desire to give, to participate, to help, the entire Biblical system of financing the Lord's work falls apart. Nobody in the church, myself certainly included, has the right to compel or coerce a contribution. Instead, our giving depends entirely on our desire to give, and I believe that this desire exists in the church in Joliet. The way we contribute, or don't, isn't some separate issue from the rest of our spiritual lives. Instead, it's the same issue. It comes from the same fundamental answer to the question of whether we want to live our lives for God and for others, or whether we want to live those lives for ourselves. I know how the brethren here answer that question. You're not here because you want to be mean, selfish people. You're here because you want to rise above that, to imitate the selfless love of Jesus. If that's the kind of people we want to be, we also know how freely from our means we want to give.

And yet, it's easy for those good intentions to falter, just as they do in any other area of our spiritual lives. We want to do right, we long to do right, but so often, we find ourselves doing the opposite. Like the Corinthians, we need reminders to be our best selves, to put our good intentions about giving into practice rather than feeling guilty about not following through, to consider what we do have and can give, rather than at what we don't and can't. In this, good intentions aren't sufficient, but they are essential.

Second, Paul points out that giving is about ensuring **EQUALITY**. Look at 2 Corinthians 8:13-15. This is particularly on point in Paul's case, when he is taking up a collection for needy saints in Jerusalem. However, it applies with equal force to us. This whole discussion isn't about numbers. It's not about money. It's not about dollars and cents. It's about people, the gospel preachers in other places whom we support.

I know these brethren. I've even been in David Girardot's house. I guarantee you, they are not riding the gravy train at our expense! All they ask from us is the support to sustain themselves and their families at a modest level while they devote themselves to the word. Also, what about all the other people in those places, the Christians who need edifying, the lost who need to hear the gospel in the first place? Without our help, those things don't happen, at least not to the degree that they do today.

Besides, the day may come when we need help ourselves. Like the Christians in Corinth who could face famine someday, the church in Joliet may well pass through a rough patch. If we haven't been diligent in helping other churches, those other churches may not be around to help us.

Paul next describes the **PRECAUTIONS** that he is taking in handling the money. They are presented in 2 Corinthians 8:16-21. We're not terribly concerned with transporting a large sum of money to Jerusalem 2000 years ago, so the precise details of these arrangements need not concern us. However, there

are two takeaway applications. The first is that in our dealings with money, we need not only to be honest, but openly and obviously honest. Second, the best way to ensure this is to involve lots of brethren.

Let's look at these in reverse order. I seem to recall having heard of some bad event involving the church treasury in the murky past of the Joliet church, but whether or not this is true, we've evolved a fairly sophisticated system for dealing with money. Every Sunday, two men count the contribution. A third man takes the deposit to the bank. A fourth man, Jeff, handles the money and makes reports to the men's meetings. I think these precautions are prudent to take. I would trust every brother here with the Lord's money, but from Judas Iscariot onward, disciples who appeared trustworthy have proven not to be. The several men in this process check one another, so that no single man can take advantage of our trust.

This is important because it assures us that the money we contribute to the Lord's work is actually going to go to the Lord's work. In denominational churches, it is often the case that only about 10 percent of the contribution goes toward spreading the gospel, while the other 90 percent goes to administrative overhead and everything else under the sun. This shows, I think, the Lord's wisdom in ordering his church in autonomous local churches, the great majority of which are very efficient in their spending. The money that we give, then, is money that will actually go toward a useful object.

Even beyond the financial impact, though, Paul points out that giving has a spiritual impact, as **THE PROOF OF LOVE**. He explains in 2 Corinthians 8:22-24. In context, here's what has been going on. Paul has already heard the Corinthians talking excitedly about how much they mean to contribute. Paul then has turned around and told the Christians in Macedonia about the intended generosity of the church in Corinth. Now, though, is the day of reckoning. Representatives from those Macedonian churches are accompanying Paul to Corinth. If the Corinthians don't follow through, both they and Paul will be embarrassed.

The point is, I think, that we need to put our money where our mouth is. We say that we want the gospel to be preached everywhere. We say that men who willingly preach the gospel in "hard places" are worthy of our honor and help. We need to make sure that our actions line up with what we say. Wouldn't it be a terrible thing if we assented to all these things in Bible class, then turned around and asked Jeff to write letters to the men we support, saying we couldn't support them anymore? That would be the proof of our love, I guess, but I don't think it's the proof that any of us want to offer.

Finally, Paul emphasizes the importance of **PREPARATION** to giving. Look at 2 Corinthians 9:1-5. He knew that if he showed up and surprised the Corinthians, he and they *would* be embarrassed. Instead, he sent the epistle ahead so that the church in Corinth would be prepared for his arrival.

From this, we too should learn the value of preparation. I briefly debated moving the collection to the end of the service this morning, but I decided against that for a couple of reasons. The first is that I thought it would be a little heavy-handed. Second, though, and more importantly, this week's collection isn't really the point. I'm not preaching this sermon to shake an extra five bucks out of folks on this one occasion. Instead, I want us all to re-evaluate our attitude toward giving generally, to be people who are generous not once, but consistently. If this is our goal, if we want to be more devoted givers for the rest of our lives, we're going to have to prepare for that. We're going to have to resolve that when we make our yearly budgets, we decide first what we're going to give back to the Lord, and then make everything else work around that. We're going to have to resolve that when we get a raise or a bonus, we're going to show our gratitude by increasing our giving. We're going to have to resolve that God is going to be the priority in our finances, not our own desires. None of this makes for a simple, easy, overnight change, but it makes for a meaningful one.

### **The Spiritual Impact**

Finally, Paul explores the spiritual impact of the Corinthians' giving, or not. This begins with a discussion of **SOWING AND REAPING**. Let's read together from 2 Corinthians 9:6-7. For many of us, this is a familiar passage. It's one that tends to get trotted out during any discussion of contributing to the Lord's work. However, Paul's admonition to give as we have purposed in our heart takes on a different meaning in context. As we've seen, Paul has emphasized the similarity between giving and other good works all the way through this context. Here, he's really doing the same thing.

On the one hand, we can be grudging givers, just like we can be grudging disciples generally. There are plenty of Christians out there who want to see how close to the line they can come. They want to come as close to drunkenness as they can without actually sinning. They want to come as close to immodest dress

as they can. They want to come as close to sexual immorality as they can. If they could have their way without consequences, they would never obey. Because they do fear consequences, though, they obey, but grudgingly, at the level that they think will keep God from roasting them. A lot of Christians give this way too. Instead of asking how much they can give, they ask how little they can get away with.

On the other hand, we can offer the same joyful obedience to God's exhortation to give that we do to His other commandments. We can have our heart so set on holiness that we have no interest in testing God's limits on drunkenness, immodesty, immorality, or anything else. We don't want to please ourselves. We want to please Him. When we approach the contribution with this attitude, we ask how much, not how little. As with everything else in our lives, the way we use our money shows whether we put God first.

Next, let's consider Paul's words about **GOD'S PROMISE** to the cheerful giver. The apostle explains in 2 Corinthians 9:8-11. Before we go on, let's be clear about what this text is not saying. It is not saying that contributing to the Lord's work is a way to get rich. Sadly, a lot of false teachers out there proclaim that godliness *is* a means of gain. They appeal to their audience's greed rather than their desire to please God. They say that as long as you write that check and send it in, no matter what your motives are, for every dollar you give, you'll get seven back from the Lord. It's like winning the spiritual lottery!

Of course, the notion that we should follow Christ for material gain is a perversion of the gospel. Christians are to serve God, not Mammon. However, neither should we over-react to false teaching and fail to recognize the promise that God actually is making here. The point is pretty clear. If we give generously of our financial blessings, God will continue to bless us so that we are always able to give generously.

Unlike the get-rich-schemes of the TV preacher, our hearts are supremely important here. If we give as a cynical effort to manipulate God into enriching us, He'll see through that in a second, and our craftiness will come to nothing. However, if we give because of our love for God and our neighbor, the text tells us that God will enrich us, not for our own sakes, but so that we can continue in liberal giving. As with all of God's other promises, we can rely on this one. If we have the faith to give generously, He won't let us down.

Finally, Paul examines **THE EFFECTS OF GIVING**. Consider 2 Corinthians 9:12-15. As he points out, this isn't simply a matter of provision. After all, God was the One who at least allowed the hard times in Judea that prompted the collection for the saints in the first place. He didn't have to go through all of these human agents to provide for the needs of His people there. He could have just dumped prosperity on them Himself. However, He didn't—because simple provision was never the goal.

Instead, as Paul notes, the mere act of physical generosity creates all kinds of spiritual benefits. We've already seen that if the Corinthians were generous, the churches in Macedonia would be encouraged by it. Likewise, once the saints in Judea received the collection, they would be edified and thank God for the evidence of the faith of their Gentile brethren. God has in mind a provision that is spiritual too.

The situation is no different today. Our decision to support the Lord's work in other areas is not a merely physical decision. It has all kinds of good spiritual consequences. In Philippians 4, Paul reveals that the preaching done by preachers whom we support bears spiritual fruit for us too. In effect, we are proclaiming the gospel through our contributions. Similarly, those whom we support appreciate our help no less than Paul did in the first century, leading them to give thanks for our godliness. When we follow God's plans for the use of our money, in not one but many different ways, the glory goes to Him.