

Engage the World with the Gospel
The Joy of Giving to Gospel Ministry
2 Corinthians 8-9

I think all of us would acknowledge that the wisdom of God is much higher than our wisdom, as we read last week in Isaiah 55. We often think we are wise when we seem to be able to discern his wisdom in a situation – “Oh, I see what God is doing!” – but his wisdom is well beyond that. There are some things about God’s ways, though, that just make sense to us when we think about them. For instance, can you imagine if the Bible had been written in an age of technology rather than in an agricultural age? Well, some of you would be okay with that, but others of us most certainly would not. It makes a great deal of sense, when you think about it, that so many of the analogies in Scripture are at a level that most people through all ages have been able to discern them.

That doesn’t mean that Scripture is easy to understand, though. In fact, if it were not for the Holy Spirit enlightening our minds to the truth that is in the Bible, we would be all kinds of confused and think things like “To get to heaven, I just need to be a good person. Well, good enough.” The Bible doesn’t teach that at all, but the Holy Spirit must make the gospel clear if we are to make sense of it.

Even when we are part of God’s family and the Holy Spirit is working in our minds as well as our hearts, we are prone to interpret Scripture according to our own cultural biases, our individual personalities, and our own learning styles. In fact, we approach almost everything from an individualistic point of view, especially if we grew up in America. I have had to come to terms over the last few weeks how very much I approach church from an American perspective – and I’m the pastor!

This morning we are going to contemplate a topic that is discussed far more in the Bible than in my sermons and, probably, in most evangelical church sermons – it is the topic of financial giving that benefits gospel community and gospel ministry. Now, if you say, “Oh, there goes the preacher talking about money,” I would suggest that you are offering a culturally conditioned response. If you will look for it the next time you go through the gospels, you will be stunned to realize how much Jesus speaks about money and generous hearts and laying up treasures for oneself in heaven.

One of the complexities of Scripture is that it is not as direct as we would like for it to be on some topics. For instance, is tithing an OT command, only, or is it expected of NT believers as well? While there is no direct NT command to tithe, Jesus affirmed the religious leaders’ tithing, though he criticized their giving for show and their misapplication of God’s expectations for using money wisely and in ways that please him. And although there is no place that lays this out as crisply as I would prefer, it seems to me that the NT encourages and expects believers to give in three different places:

- 1. To the local church (Galatians 6:6)**
- 2. To those in need, both inside and outside the gospel community (Galatians 6:10 and 2 Corinthians 8-9)**
- 3. To gospel missions (The entire book of Philippians) (local ministries like Hand of Hope and Grace Adoptions)**

Because Jesus affirmed tithing, which, in the OT, went to the Temple, I think it is fair to say that the bulk of our giving should go to the church, or, another way of saying it is, to your local gospel community. If the local church is God’s design for the propagation of the gospel and there is no Plan B, then it makes sense that we give the first fruits of our monetary gifts to the church, keeping the OT pattern of God’s design for his covenant people. Once again, culture shapes thinking about giving so that if we don’t particularly care for

a decision that the church leadership makes, it follows that “good stewardship” would direct our monies elsewhere. But think about Jesus’ commendation of the widow who gave all that she had. She gave her offering to the Temple, a place upon which Jesus had pronounced judgment.

I think you can see that we could spend many Sundays thinking about this topic, but we will only be in this extended text today. We will be in Malachi, soon, where the topic will again be addressed. Although 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 address one aspect of the giving in which believers are expected to participate, this text is by far the most thorough NT treatment of believers’ giving. We will not read all the text, but we will read a good chunk of it and take a little time to make sense of it. Finally, we will draw three main principles of application from the text, though there are many more. We will begin by reading 2 Corinthians 9:6-9, then we will back up to 2 Corinthians 8. Would you please stand for the reading of the word?

9:6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. 9 As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

We are going back to chapter 8, and I want to give you the context. All the Christian world held a special place in their hearts for the Jerusalem Church. Everyone knew Jerusalem was where Jesus died and rose again. They knew that he ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives and they knew that the Holy Spirit had come upon those who were worshiping in the Jerusalem Temple at Pentecost. But, the gospel community in Jerusalem was struggling financially,

possibly due to famine, and Paul spearheaded an effort among the churches in Europe and, what was known at the time as Asia, to take an offering for the saints in Jerusalem. The parts of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 that we will not read today deal with the care taken to insure the integrity of the process, making sure that the offering got to the Jerusalem saints in total. You can be certain that our deacons and elders work hard to insure the integrity of your gifts here and we have measures in place to protect against any hint of impropriety. That is necessary, of course, because of human nature. Such careful oversight is commended in Scripture.

When Paul wrote the Corinthians, he was writing to a relatively wealthy group of believers. He challenged them to do their part by pointing to the gifts of a group of not so wealthy believers – the Macedonians, or, most likely, the Church at Philippi.

8:1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, **2** for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. **3** For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, **4** begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— **5** and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

This is the equivalent of someone writing our church today and saying, “Hey, I want to talk to you about helping a church in the Middle East, but I want to let you know what the church in Haiti is doing. I told them not to worry about this offering because they had so many needs themselves, but they begged me to be a part of this offering! As you know, they did not give out of their excess, but I will tell you this – God considers their gifts to come from a heart overflowing with a wealth of generosity! Furthermore, it is not like they said, “Okay – just tell us what you need from us and we will

write a check.” No, they gave themselves first to God, then they gave materially from their hearts.”

After giving the example, Paul says, essentially, it is your turn. You excel in so many things, and as the Macedonians have given out of their poverty, now you give out the abundance with which God has blessed you. Verses 6-7:

6 Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.

I don’t know what it is about the human heart, but it seems the more we have, the more we want to hang onto it. Isn’t it so that poor people are often the most generous? In fact, there is no indication that the two most highly praised givers in the NT – the widow that Jesus commended and now these Macedonians – ever climbed out of their poverty. They are rich in the kingdom, though! Now, in our text, Paul gets down to business, pointing to the believer’s motivation to give. Verses 8-9:

8 I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you, by his poverty, might become rich.

Think about this in contrast with the tendencies of the flesh to hoard one’s wealth. Jesus literally had everything, yet he became poor so that we could become rich. Jesus was even born into a relatively poor family and he was born in a stable. Do you think Jesus would have been born there if Joseph had money? I doubt it. Giving with a full heart makes us more like Jesus. With Gentile believers supporting Jewish believers, oneness in Christ was being affirmed.

It would be the most stunning thing we ever heard of if a couple like Bill and Melinda Gates sold everything they owned and gave 100% of their money to the most destitute homeless person in the world and then Bill and Melinda went to live on the streets. That doesn't compare to what Jesus did for us. Not only did Jesus leave the glories of heaven, but he took our sin upon himself and bore God's wrath against sin. He did this in our place, so that if we repent of our sin and put our trust in Jesus, we will enjoy the glories of heaven for eternity! So, how are you doing with your giving? While none of us is able to give what Jesus gave for us, his generous sacrifice for us ought to motivate our hearts to give generously.

We will read verses 10-15 without comment, but the truth of these verses will come up in the three points of conclusion to the message:

10 And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. 11 So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. 12 For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 13 For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness 14 your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. 15 As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

The challenge to giving continues in chapter 9. We will look briefly at verses 6-15:

9:6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or

under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. 9 As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

Isn't it a shame that the only ones who quote these verses about sowing and reaping in relation to money are the prosperity gospel people? Yet, both here and in Galatians 6, the promise of rich reward is used in association with our giving. It is important to note, though, that the promise of return God gives to us is not financial, but a harvest of righteousness in the kingdom of God, which will last forever. Our bank account may be wiped out in stunningly quick order, but the riches God promises are eternal. As we look at verse 10, see if any of it is familiar?

10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

The first part of this verse comes from Isaiah 55:10, a verse that we read last week. It is, by the way, a promise that God will take care of you. I am sure that was part of Paul's thinking in quoting it. God will take care of you as you are generous to others. While our identity as Americans may be measured by material wealth, our identity as believers is measured in ways that will not be discernible to the natural eye. That is the focus of these next five verses, which end with praise to God.

11 You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. 12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. 13 By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your

submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. 15 Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

We will close with three principles about our giving that very much overlap:

- 1. It is the blessed privilege of all believers to give as a response to Jesus' sacrifice**

I am going to ask you a question and I imagine you know the answer before I even ask the question? Is NT giving a responsibility and duty that believers are expected to perform or is it a great privilege to be a part of what God is doing as he builds his kingdom? YES! When we get to Malachi, we will find God rebuking his people for their failure to tithe, but today's text presents the great blessing and privilege it is to give to the Lord's work. Though he was rich, he became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich.

So, how should we give? How should we divide our giving? God says that each should give according to his or her heart, not under compulsion. It is clear, though, that if God has the place in our hearts that he deserves, we will give willingly and generously. I will make a suggestion in just a moment about ways to structure your giving, but it may look quite different from person to person, although some of the basics will be true for all of us. Before I get to that, though, I would like to address all of you under 25 years of age. In fact, I want encourage you strongly, if not beg you, to begin giving now. It will be MUCH more difficult for you to make the decision to give generously when you are older, and I promise you that you won't regret a life of giving.

Here is one suggestion. Start with giving 10% of your income to the local church. Giving begins with the tithe, in the OT. The NT principle of giving is found in Galatians 6:6, which says, in so many words, to pay the preacher – and, we apply it, pay the rest of the staff and the mortgage and the light bill. After you have marked out 10% for the church, support ministries and missionaries, if the Lord so leads you. And always be ready to help those in need, both inside the church and outside the church. One way to do that is to give to our benevolence offering that we take on the last day of the month, which happens to be today. Galatians 6:10 gives priority to those inside the church. Once you have made the decision to give, remember:

2. God keeps different books than we do

Can you imagine how the widow who gave all that she had felt when she saw Jesus after she died? The Pharisees and Sadducees would have scoffed at the value of her gift, but Jesus knew. God keeps different books than we do. You may think that your small tithe to Grace wouldn't mean anything, but God may honor your giving in such a way that it turns out to be the most important gift that any of us give! If someone looked at the books, they may say, "Well, that person didn't contribute much," and God may be saying, "That small gift is the very reason I have blessed both the bank account and the ministry of this church."

You may be convinced of both the responsibility and the privilege it is to give, but since you are not in the habit of giving, you may think, "I simply cannot afford to start tithing." Let me remind you, I have never heard anyone say, "I started tithing and it ruined me financially!" I have heard the opposite many times, though. "We made the decision to begin tithing when it made no sense at all and somehow we were able to give and pay all of our bills." Even people who keep a pretty close account sometimes have no idea how it is

that God makes it work, but he does. Giving with a grateful heart does not guarantee financial return, but God guarantees spiritual return, and even materially, we see over and over how God takes care of generous people. Proverbs 11:24 says, “One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.” So true. I have seen it play out time and again. Last:

- 3. The joy we receive in giving to God’s work will be commensurate with the appreciation we have for the gift he has given to us in Jesus.**

The joy of giving permeates 2 Corinthians 8-9. Chapter 9, verse 7 says that God loves a cheerful giver, or as some would translate it, a hilarious giver. It is more than just resisting the urge to think and say, as you put your tithe in the plate, “Well, there goes a trip to the beach.” Instead, our offering time ought to sound like a stadium when the home team has just scored a touchdown in a big game! Okay, resist *that* urge, as well, when we take our benevolence offering in just a few moments, but you get the point.

I suppose we will have that kind of joy of giving when we fully embrace what it means that Jesus gave his all for us. One way that you can develop that joy is to preach the gospel to yourself every day. Don’t be disappointed with yourself when you sin, but be disappointed that you sinned against God and confess your sin to him. Even as you begin to confess, the joy of forgiveness will begin to turn your heart from sorrow to joy. Why? Because although Jesus was rich beyond comprehension, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty you may become rich. Let’s pray.