



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

2 CORINTHIANS 8:3-4; 9:6-10 (ESV)

JANUARY 2016

The Economics of Grace

I'm confessing: I love the Christmas season. I know it has been commercialized and materialism runs rampant, but I love the excitement and joyous spirit that seems to grip most of us. Who doesn't enjoy little ones running toward Santa, thinking of flying reindeer, waiting for the big day?

I know; I should be offended at all this hype when the real issues are the birth of Jesus and the cosmic ramifications of his incarnation. And, believe me, I don't for a second want to diminish that.

But I also love the focus on giving gifts. Again, I am aware that marketers manipulate us to buy ridiculous things for people we might not even like. But I like the giving and receiving.

Actually, while I am confessing, I should admit that I really enjoyed Halloween this year. Having three grandsons (under 6 years old) all dressed up in Star Wars costumes adds to the atmosphere. Yes, I do know Halloween is a celebration of death and all that. I like the giving and receiving. After the boys had finished their trick or treating, they came home early with baskets full of candy. Kids and

parents kept coming to their front door, so the boys started handing out candy from their own baskets. When I asked them what they liked most about the whole night, they said they liked giving out their candy. (They did eat a piece or two themselves.)

It shouldn't surprise us that down deep, we all enjoy giving. We are created in the image of the *Giving God*. Giving is his nature. His creation was a gift. He didn't owe anyone anything. He gave Adam and Eve the privilege of partnership in managing the earth. When they sinned, he gave them skins to cover their shame. When Cain killed his brother, God gave him a mark on his head to prevent others from killing him. He gave Noah instructions to save a remnant. He gave Abram a promise that would bring restoration to a

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fallen world. He gave Moses the Law. He gave Israel judges to deliver them from their enemies. He gave them a king when they demanded it and later picked one out for them. He gave them prophets to speak hope in desperate times. He gave them respite from Persia. He gave us Jesus who is the fulfillment of all the promises of God. He gave us the Spirit to enlighten and empower us as his restored partners on earth. He gave us his own life that loves to give. We were givers by creation, and now we are givers by new birth. We have been born again of the imperishable seed of God. We have his DNA.

When the churches of Macedonia heard about the trouble the saints in Jerusalem were having, they wanted to give. However, they were in poverty too. Perhaps Paul suggested that they were not expected to give since they were likewise in need and suffering. They were indignant. They begged for the opportunity to give.

For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints . . .

2 Corinthians 8:3-4 (ESV)

We aren't surprised. They had been born again of the very seed of God. They had been captured by the life of The Giver. It didn't matter that they didn't have much. They gave what they could and even beyond. They had discovered that

God will empower us to be his delegates in giving his resources.

We humans are recipients of the very breath of God, so like Him we all are imprinted with a desire to give. We can't represent God properly if we don't delight in giving. So, what happened? When sin entered the picture, fear began to govern the human perspective. We began to view resources as a zero-sum equation. Under that perspective, there is only a limited supply, and if someone else gets something it means I don't. Thus, in order to be safe we have to accumulate as much as possible and preserve it for our own security and significance. When we give, we are diminishing our supply. So, we tend to give little and resent others who need what we have worked so hard to earn. That is a sure-fire formula for ultimate poverty.

One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.

Proverbs 11:24 (ESV)

God in his mercy gave instructions to his people about handling provision. He told them to bring the first fruits of their crops to the Temple to be given in recognition that God had empowered their work. He instituted a system whereby each person felt ownership in the community by bringing a percentage of their produce to the Temple to be used for aid, support of the Levites, temple maintenance, and even governance in the theocracy. These were called "tithes." This

financial system was part of the stipulations of the covenant God had made with them. If they fulfilled the stipulations, they would be blessed. If they didn't, they would be cursed. Of course, all of this

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was part of the preparatory work of the Law. God was getting a people ready for a full restoration where they could live as mature sons of God. There would come a day when a new covenant would be made. It would be between God and mankind's ultimate representative: Jesus. He came to earth as a man and lived up to all stipulations and fully absorbed all the curses of disobedience. He ascended to rule over God's creation and gave the Spirit to believers on earth who owned him as their mediator. These people can live as He lived on earth—beyond fear and begging to be given an opportunity to give.

Some have insisted that the preparatory rudiments of the Old Covenant should govern the whole issue of handling resources. They have exalted a form of tithing like a tax with warnings that

curses await those who don't pay it. It is difficult to bring the tax system from Old Testament Israel over into the New Covenant, and still remain true to the meaning of scripture. Giving ten percent of our income to the local church is not the same as bringing the tithes into the storehouse of Israel. And, the curses spoken of by Malachi were related to the covenant they were then under. We are in a new covenant with new dynamics. Kindergarten is over. When people realize they cannot obey enough to gain blessings, they rejoice in a Savior who obeyed in their behalf and bestows his blessing on them. As they share his very life, they discover that they want to give far more than the Law required. In fact, they realize that they would rather sow than make bread, though both are necessary.

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 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 . . . 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.

2 Corinthians 9:6–10 (ESV)

This is a touchy subject for some who are concerned that people won't support the churches if they are not tithing as they are instructed. They genuinely want the ministries of the churches to be funded, and they want people to feel ownership

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by participating in the life of the community. I am grateful that my parents taught me to tithe. I was a child, and each dollar I earned or received as allowance was subject to the ten percent rule. It taught me valuable lessons. I continued to practice these rudimentary principles even into adulthood, but I found the immense joy of giving to be a far better way. I still support my local church. I also give to the proclamation of the gospel in many venues. I look for opportunities to help others reach their legitimate goals. I rejoice at opportunities to give to the poor, etc. And honestly, I am still struggling with using too much of the seed to make bread for me, rather than sowing it. But, I cannot go back to kindergarten and be satisfied with a flat tax. The giving God lives in us. He is begging to give. As I get in touch with his life, I rejoice.

I heard a story a long time ago that parallels my own feelings as a boy. Several

boys lived in a poor neighborhood, and none of them had bicycles. They watched other boys ride through the playground on their bikes, and they dreamed. One day a large shiny automobile stopped at the playground, and the nice man in a suit called out to a boy who was on the swing. The man opened the trunk of the car and brought out a new red bicycle. "I'm your uncle from Michigan," he said. "I thought you might like this gift." The boy's smile was from ear to ear. He began riding the new bike with glee. One of the other boys looking on turned to his friend and said, "Boy, I wish I could be an uncle like that."

There is a giver inside you. Renounce the fear that feeds greed. Give! It's your new nature. You are a son of God.



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