

## Cheerful Giving II Corinthians 9:6-15

Paul makes giving sound so good, doesn't he? At the beginning of the passage, he urges us to give cheerfully, and at the end he thanks God for the unspeakable, which is the King James' way of saying indescribable, gift of giving. But let's be honest – most of us don't come anywhere close to having this sort of attitude. When we give, it's more often out of a sense of duty or even guilt, both of which verse 7 warns us against.

And that warning makes sense when we think about the relational aspect of giving. I mean, how would you feel if your husband or wife or children only spent time with you or gave you a Christmas or birthday present because they thought they had to? If a gift doesn't flow out of true love, if it doesn't come from the heart, it doesn't mean nearly as much, does it? So why should we think God is any different where it comes to our gifts? Why wouldn't God want our gifts for Him and His work to flow out of genuine love?

Okay, so how do we get to the point where we are working and giving to God and toward the advancement of His Kingdom from our hearts? How can we truly become joyful, cheerful givers?

Well, to answer this question, maybe we need first to turn it around. Why don't we give as freely and cheerfully as Paul indicates we should? In other words, what are some of the barriers that keep us from giving cheerfully?

At first, I suppose most of us would simply point to our calendars and bank accounts – we don't give more joyfully because we we're not sure we can afford it. And while I certainly wouldn't pretend to know the ins and outs of any of your budgets, such hesitance often springs from a much a more basic problem – the fear that if we give too much away, we might not have enough leftover for ourselves. Or to use Paul's terms, we tend to sow sparingly because we don't think there will be enough seed to go around.

Well, if that's the case, we need to take a closer look at verses 8-10. After all, God is the One Who supplies the seed, right? So it's no wonder that Paul promises God will give us a sufficiency to do every good work. In other words, we don't need to be anxious about how little time or money we have, for God will make sure that we have more than enough to give away.

And didn't Jesus make a similar promise in our responsive reading this morning? Didn't He assure us that God would feed us in the same way that He feeds the birds? Didn't He promise us that God would clothe us the way He dresses the fields with wildflowers? No, Jesus makes it clear that being anxious about our material condition is just silly.

But just as Paul emphasizes the great gift of giving, the blessing of doing the work of the Kingdom of God and meeting each others' needs, so Jesus insists that we must get our eyes off of ourselves. He says we must not lay up for ourselves treasure on earth. And when you think about it, that's just plain common sense. I mean, you can't take it with you – have you ever seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer?

But even in this life, the things we treasure don't last forever. After all, even things that look permanent, like wooden clock faces or bricks in a building, sometimes need to be replaced after 150

years. No, it's no wonder that Jesus says we should desire to have treasure in Heaven, where things don't wear out. And of course, what is valuable in Heaven is serving God and doing His will. That's what it means to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness, and that's the only way any of us can ever build lasting, permanent wealth.

And such a heavenly, God-centered perspective on what is valuable can guard us against a popular misunderstanding of both of these passages. After all, some people read verse 6 and conclude that if we want to gain more worldly wealth, all we have to do is give away more of what we have – in this view, blessing others is just a method of getting what we want. Just so, some people read Jesus' promises that God will meet our needs and assume that God will also satisfy all our material desires.

In short, many people today believe these passages teach the same sort of thing the ancient pagans believed. For they worshipped their false gods for selfish, materialistic reasons, donating some crops to get a bigger harvest, sacrificing a sheep or goat so they would have bigger flocks. In the same way, teachers of the prosperity gospel use these passages to say that all you have to do is name it and claim it. Tell God what you want, and if you trust Him enough – and if you send in a generous enough donation – He'll give it to you.

But does that really capture the meaning of either passage? After all, Jesus does promise that God will meet our needs, but He also warns us of the futility of focusing our lives on the things of this world. He says we can't serve both God and mammon, or money, so how could He be encouraging us to take advantage of our relationship to God just to get more money?

In the same way, these two chapters from Paul's letter to the Corinthians aren't about getting, but about giving. In verse 8, Paul promises us a sufficiency not so that we can keep it, but so that we may abound in every good work. In verse 10, Paul says God will give us bread for food, but also seed so that we might sow it, so that we might bring forth a harvest not of material things, but of righteousness, of deeds done according to God's will. In short, we give cheerfully not so that we can get more – that's the false prosperity gospel. No, we give cheerfully because it's what God wants us to do – that's the way true lovers of God think.

But there's another potential barrier to such joyful, cheerful giving. If sometimes our anxiety about having enough holds us back, sometimes we are hesitant to give because we don't think anything we can do could possibly make a difference. In other words, we might not only be afraid that we won't have enough – we might be afraid that the problems around us are too big for our meager contributions of time or money to do any real good.

But that sort of thinking is just as materialistic, just as focused on the things of this world as is our anxiety about not having enough time or money to meet our daily needs. Think for example about the poverty we see all around us. If we compare the financial needs of all the people in our county with the amount of wealth that is available to be shared, it would be easy to fall into despair. There's just no way we can possibly support 21% 42% of the population that currently lives below the poverty line. And think of all the sick or lonely people you know who need a visit or a ride to the doctor, all the single mothers who need someone to watch their kids, all the teachers who could use an extra pair of hands in their classrooms – how could this little group of Christians possibly make any difference at all?

But what if there's also a spiritual element combined with our gifts of time and money? What if our gifts become part of a larger strategy to change hearts and minds, drawing people into a real relationship with the living God? That's the way First Presbyterian Church in Ocean Springs is conducting their local mercy ministries, and it's making a big difference in their church as well as in their community.

Now, most of us content ourselves with giving handouts while keeping the needy at arm's length – you know, like supporting a soup kitchen where folks come and eat and then leave. But First Ocean Springs insists that those who receive financial assistance from them become part of their worshipping community. They try to incorporate needy people into Sunday School classes and small groups. And this kind of holistic ministry, combining material with relational and spiritual help, changes lives. For it turns out that when people turn to Christ and build real relationships with God's people, they also tend to change some of the behaviors that have contributed to their poverty in the first place.

That's why Paul stresses not just the material value of the Corinthians' gifts, but the spiritual good those gifts will do as well. In verse 13, he reminds us that giving to the needy is much like a scientist's experiment – it's a great way of demonstrating, of proving our subjection, our obedience to Christ. In other words, as we put our time and money where our mouth is, as we reach out in real love for needy people, we are proving that we really believe the salvation of sinners is more important to us than is our comfort. As we give, especially if we give in a sacrificial way, we are demonstrating that we really do love other people just as much as we love ourselves, or maybe even more. Such giving is thus an important part of successful evangelism.

And living this sort of consistent, believable witness should have two big effects on the recipients. In verses 11 and 12, Paul says that those who receive such selfless gifts will be drawn to give thanks, not so much to us but to God. Moreover, in verse 13 Paul says that when the needy see our faithfulness, they will glorify God. In short, even a gift that isn't worth very much by worldly standards can have a big spiritual impact, drawing people closer to God and to His people.

But our gifts can also have a big spiritual impact on us. Verse 14 reminds us that a natural result of our generosity is that those we help will long for us, or yearn for us. But more than that, Paul says that those who receive our gifts will be drawn to pray for us, even as we love them and pray for them. What greater return on our investment could we possibly want?

So, maybe those prosperity gospel preachers are onto something after all, at least if we keep in mind what's really important. For we really do receive great blessings when we give – the blessing of love, the blessing of prayer, the blessing of greater, deeper fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, along with the blessing of knowing that we are living in accordance with God's will for our lives. Indeed, how else can we truly follow Jesus, unless we give of ourselves in the selfless, sacrificial, unconditional way that He did?

So, doesn't it make sense to give away some worldly things, some time and money, to gain such heavenly treasure? And if we know our giving is what God wants, what will bless others, and what will bring such great blessings to us, why shouldn't we give cheerfully?