

Responsible Giving
II Corinthians 8:10-9:5

So, why don't we Presbyterians pass the collection plate after the morning message? Some churches do this, and such a practice would certainly encourage people to act immediately on what they have heard. And yes, as we learned last week, we are called to give of our time, talents, and treasure freely, generously, and self-sacrificially, just as Christ gave of Himself to us. But today we learn we are also called to give responsibly, ensuring that what God has entrusted to us will be put to the best use for His glory and for the good of others. And to give responsibly, we must not respond to every emotional appeal that comes along.

For example, I went to Jackson to do some hospital visits yesterday and, I saw man standing at a busy intersection holding up a sign: Need help. Going home. Veteran. Who wouldn't want to help out someone in such obvious need? And why shouldn't we give a dollar or two when it means so little to us and might mean so much to him?

Well, we all know the difference between helping the needy and enabling the bad behavior of the idle, right? If you give money to such a stranger, how do you know it won't end up being spent on cigarettes or booze or street drugs? Your dollar might be the last one a junkie needs to get his next fix – and given the penchant some pushers have for cutting their drugs with dangerous additives, that next fix might be his last.

That's why in verse 14 Paul mentions both the Corinthians' abundance and the want, the true need of the persecuted, famine-stricken Christians in Jerusalem. Paul is not asking the Corinthians to deprive themselves so that lazy people can live in ease, but because needy Christians are truly desperate. It is to meet genuine needs that we are called to give, contributing some of our abundance to those who are lacking, to distribute the resources God has given to His Church more equally among all the members.

But how can we know who is truly needy? Well, one way is to give locally, where you know the recipients and you can see the results of your gifts. We give to the Center for Pregnancy Choices in Vicksburg, and we know young women will be empowered to give birth and care for their babies. We give to Christian Volunteer Services, and we can see wheelchair ramps going up all over the county. We give to Hands of Hope, and we can similar home repairs along with gifts distributed to nursing home residents.

Of course, another good way to make sure you are helping the truly needy is to get directly involved in mission work. Of course, this takes time as well as money. It's easy to give a dollar to someone on the street, but it takes more effort to get her what she needs from the store. But pitching in to help Hands of Hope build a wheelchair ramp, whether in Port Gibson, Mississippi or Welch, West Virginia, or volunteering to help another congregation put on a Vacation Bible School gives you a chance to get to know the people you are helping. That's a great way to achieve the sort of equality Paul takes about in verses 13-15, for whenever we bless others with our time and talent as well as our treasure, we always receive a blessing in return.

But what about helping people who are too far away for us to go and meet them? How can we be sure that our gifts will really help them? In these cases, truly responsible giving relies on trust.

Perhaps you can't travel to Uganda yourself to train pastors or help orphans. But you can give to Bob Penny who works at African Bible College there. You can give to Mike and Lori Salley and the ministry of Show Mercy International. Giving to people whom we know and trust helps insure that we are giving responsibly, and that our gifts have the biggest possible impact.

We can also give to causes and ministries that have been investigated and approved by those whom we trust. For example, our General Assembly has approved the Engage 2025 project, and we know that World Outreach does a good job of screening and training those they approve to be global workers. As a part of this project, our presbytery's World Outreach committee is supporting a field team working in the Middle East. When we give to support these missionaries, we can do so with confidence, knowing that they are truly working on our behalf, showing the love of Christ to those who have had little opportunity to hear the truth of the gospel and to see it lived out in real life.

And sometimes these different levels of trust come together to give us even more confidence. Take my recent trip to Brazil. My first trip there, way back in 2001, was led by the Outreach Foundation, a mission sending agency that has resourced evangelical congregations within the PCUSA for years. Outreach now has a formal relationship with the EPC as well and is still supporting church planting initiatives in the Northeast of Brazil. I saw some of those church plants and met some of the church planters during my trip.

But our confidence in helping the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil doesn't just rest on trust in the Outreach Foundation. For many years the Presbytery of Mississippi had a partnership with the Presbytery of the Northeast. As part of this partnership, Diego Moura and Dayan Paiva attended Chamberlain-Hunt about 15 years ago. And because we have known them for so long, our trust is not only institutional but personal.

So, when Diego, who is now a pastor and the Moderator of the Presbytery of the Northeast, tells me that they have two critical needs – to train more pastors for the churches they have already planted and to provide salary support for small congregations in poor areas, it's easy to give to these causes. That's because a high level of institutional and personal trust helps us give with a clear conscience and with great confidence, even when our gifts must travel far away, helping people we may never meet.

This is the same sort of encouragement Paul used when writing to the Corinthian Christians. Starting with chapter 8 verse 16, Paul points out several people they could trust to make sure their gifts reached their intended beneficiaries, distant though they may have been. He mentions Titus and his care for the Corinthians. He mentions another unnamed brother who was not only a famous preacher but who had also been specially appointed by the churches to travel with Paul and help administer the gifts that had been collected. And of course Paul himself, their organizing pastor, would be part of the delegation to bless the poor in Jerusalem. Given such a high level of personal and institutional trust, the Corinthians could thus give with confidence, knowing they were giving to a good cause and that their gifts would not be lost or misspent.

But if we should give with discernment – making sure the cause is genuine and those who administer our gifts are honest – we should also give with discipline. Instead of relying on the latest emotional appeal, we should carefully and prayerfully seek to discern what God wants us to do with the time, talent, and treasure He has entrusted to us. And then we should follow through on sharing our resources in the way that God has called us to do.

This is why, at both the beginning and the end of this passage, Paul encourages the Corinthians to keep their promises, to fulfill their pledge to help the Jerusalem Christians – not to put off collecting the necessary funds, but to have their gift prepared when Paul’s mission team comes to collect it.

Why is such discipline so important? Well, think about all the different causes I’ve mentioned this morning – and there are many, many others that clamor for our attention via telemarketers and TV ads and letters in the mail. There’s no way we can or should contribute to them all. So we have to make careful choices about our giving. But once we’ve realized that all we have is on loan from God, once we’ve asked God to lead us in using our resources according to His will, and once we’ve come to the conclusion that God wants us to contribute toward a certain cause in a certain way, we need to follow through. Good intentions without action don’t help anyone, and they certainly don’t honor God.

And it turns out that the process of being disciplined in our giving can actually help us make the most of our resources. For if we are to give of our funds, such disciplined giving means taking a close look at our budgets – for if we are to know how much money we can spare, we have to take a look at all the other things we spend it on, right? In the same way, if we are to give of our time, we’ll have to take a close look at our calendars – for we can’t know how much time we can spare unless we know what other activities occupy us throughout the week.

And it turns out that the very process of examining our finances and our calendars might just reveal some wasted time or money that we could easily and painlessly devote to God’s purposes. But let’s not rule out the possibility of cutting down on some of what we spend on ourselves so that we can make a bigger impact for the Kingdom. There can’t be anything wrong with self-sacrificial giving if that’s what Jesus did. So, once we discern a true need, and once we are confident in our ability to meet that need, there’s really no good reason to hold back, is there?

But careful, prayerful budgeting of our time and talent doesn’t just honor God and benefit ourselves by maximizing what we can give. Such disciplined, regular giving also provides a big boost to those who receive our gifts, our partners who are engaged in mission work. After all, church planters and missionaries have budgets to meet too. And it would be a lot easier for them to do their work if they didn’t have to stop what they are doing periodically to travel around and scrape up support. So when we plan our giving, when we make pledges and keep them, just as Paul encouraged the Corinthians to do, we help our partners in ministry make the most of their time, talents, and treasure as well. That’s another way we can achieve equality among all the members of the Body of Christ.

But here’s where one more potential problem can arise. Once we’ve determined a need that we think God wants us to meet, and once we’ve pledged to help meet that need with some of our time, talent, and treasure, it’s still possible for us to become discouraged. For when we look at how little we have to give, and when we look at how crammed full our schedules already are, it’s easy to fall into despair. It’s easy to imagine that we can’t possibly make a difference for the Kingdom of God.

Well, if that’s what you’re thinking, take a look at chapter 8 and verse 12. Paul tells the Corinthians that it isn’t the amount they give that’s important. As long as they are willing to give to a good cause, and as long as they are disciplined and steady in their giving, then their gifts will be accepted according to what they have, not according to what they don’t have. In other words, you can only give what you have, so you shouldn’t feel guilty about being unable to give more.

But with careful thought and prayer, combined with a disciplined, steady commitment to a good cause, a little can go a long way. Let's say that after analyzing your budget you find that you can only spare one extra dollar a day. Hector Reynoso is asking for individuals to pledge \$50 this summer to put Genesis Mercedes' building fund over the top – a dollar a day could do that. Or Hands of Hope is asking for just \$10 per month to send food boxes to the poor in West Virginia – that would be well within your budget.

Or what if you could scrape up just two extra dollars per day? Depending on the exchange rate, you would be able to pay the full tuition for a candidate for the ministry in Northeast Brazil to attend seminary. That same amount would provide medical care, clean water, and education for a Ugandan orphan through Show Mercy International. In other words, you don't have to be Sam Walton or Truett Cathy to make a difference for the Kingdom.

And just think what we can do when we combine our efforts. After all, Paul didn't expect the Corinthians to foot the whole bill for supporting the Jerusalem Christians – he asked every congregation he had a connection with to take part in the effort. Just so, think what this congregation could do if everyone gave just one extra dollar a day – we could easily make it possible for three small congregations in the Sertao to call pastors. And think what just one hour a week could accomplish in our community if we all volunteered that time – at the library or the nursing home or the hospital, or in the school system, or just picking up trash on the street. And think what the 50 congregations in our Presbytery could do if we were all to work together – there's a new church plant for Portuguese-speaking folk getting started in Covington, Louisiana...

Now, it's easy to get swept up in the enthusiasm, but that's not the point of this message. There's a reason we don't pass the plate after the sermon – I don't want you to respond to a purely emotional appeal. Instead, take a good look at all the opportunities your session and your presbytery have presented for you to give your time, talent and treasure. You don't have to support all of them, but which ones really resonate with you? And then take a look around you at the other opportunities God has brought to your individual attention, by whatever means. And then pray about all these things. Take a close look at your calendars and your budgets, and ask God to make it clear how He wants you to use the resources He has entrusted to you. And then, don't worry about how little you may have. Just give as the Lord leads you, as generously and steadily as you can. And then watch what God does.