

THE MINISTRY OF GIVING

2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15

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Today we're going to take two whole chapters, chapters 8 and 9, of 2 Corinthians. I want to speak to you on the theme of "The Ministry of Giving." Normally, my messages have anywhere between one or three or four main points. But I'm going to warn you in advance today—although it won't take me an eternity to preach this message—that I have ten points. That'll give you some idea of spacing your notes.

Giving. A sensitive subject, isn't it? Giving to the Lord's work. There are some in the body of Christ that think we ought to never mention any need within the body, but that, if we're aware on the leadership level, we pray, and if it's the Lord's will, the need is supplied. If it's not, it's not. Then there are others, on the opposite extreme, who will use every trick in the book to manipulate people to give and, in effect, to become a discredit to the name of Christ through the fundraising techniques that are used. Then there are people in the middle of the road who say, "We ought to pray, yet it's also biblical to ask."

It's interesting, as you look at the two instances in Scripture—especially in the New Testament—where offerings are being received; one of them (Acts 2 and 4) deals with the spontaneous offering in the Jerusalem church, where, after the Day of Pentecost, they spontaneously sell their homes and divide their assets and have all things in common. That doesn't appear to be a fund drive initiated by the leadership. It seems to happen as an overflow of the great love that God's put in the hearts of these Spirit-filled believers. We might look back on that perspective and see how good the Spirit was in giving them that inspiration, for the time

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shortly came when all their property was confiscated anyway, and at least they got to enjoy it by giving it away.

The other occasion when there's an offering in Scripture is that passage which we read about today, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The references to this offering extend also over to 1 Corinthians 16, where the plans for the offering were set, some twelve months earlier, approximately, than the setting of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. The offering is also referred to in Romans 15 and in the Book of Galatians. It was an offering that was being taken throughout the churches that Paul founded on his first three missionary journeys. An offering taken to assist in the relief of the saints that were in Jerusalem, in Judea.

It was an offering which was very clearly established by the leadership, that is, the apostle Paul. I think it's also clear to see, as we look at 2 Corinthians 8, that persons had in effect made a pledge or faith promise at an earlier point toward giving this offering. There were persons involved in the collection of the offering. So it was a well-advertised need throughout the body.

Now the time has come—some months after the initial pledge—for the offering to actually be received and to be taken to Jerusalem. That is Paul's concern as he writes 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

We must remember, as we open these two chapters, that Paul is not addressing the matter of support for the local church. He's not addressing the matter of the tithe. Neither is he speaking about meeting the needs of the saints within the local body even. It is assumed that all these things were already going on at Corinth. The particular offering that is being raised is an offering to meet the needs of saints in another place. In that respect, I think it is very similar to the kind of missionary giving that we engage in here in this church and the giving that you and we participate in, in terms of meeting the needs of persons that are in very destitute struck areas outside of our community, in other places. We attempt to provide for the needs of our own as

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they occur. But we're also involved in meeting needs away from us, over and above our normal giving, to support the work of God in our local area.

So Paul is concerned about some principles of giving that relate to this matter. I think our giving, like all other aspects of our Christian living, ought to flow out of a biblical basis. So Paul really is giving us, in these two chapters, ten principles that relate to our giving which is "over and above tithing." I think they relate to our tithe as well. They are timeless principles:

I. The first principle that is struck very cleanly for us is verse 1 is that the true motive for our giving is always to be the grace of God.

"And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches" (2 Corinthians 8:1, NIV). To give you a geographical setting, the Macedonian churches were north of the Corinthian church or the church in Achaia, the province of Achaia. It'd be like Paul writing to the southern Californians, talking to them about what the northern Californians were doing. Paul says, "I want to talk to you, first of all, about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. The whole offering which these friends of the north are giving is out of a sense of the grace of God." If you were to put the reasons we ought to give on a scale of importance from one to ten, with ten being the most important, certainly the best reason, the number ten on the list (in terms of the most important thing) ought to be that we give because of what God has done for us. Because of the grace of God. Not because somebody has manipulated us. Not because we've been coerced. Not because we're doing it out of a sense of duty. But because of what God has done for us. So that the Christian response is always a response that flows out of freedom.

In the New Testament, giving is not legislated. The Macedonians gave because their hearts were moved by the grace of God. And it well might be said that, if we've never had a sense that God

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has done anything for us, then it ought also to be said that we are probably not good candidates to give anything to God's work. Those who give who do not give from the sense that "God has done something in my life," merely start off by missing the whole joy and reason for giving.

Giving is, first of all, a response to the grace of God in our life.

II. A second principle that Paul shares, in verses 2–5, is that the example of others is a legitimate inspiration for our own giving.

He, in this principle, cites five different things that the northern Grecian Christians had done to inspire the southern Grecian Christians. He said that, out of a severe test of affliction, out of a severe trial, they had had overflowing joy. We don't know what this particular affliction or trial was. But we do know that, whatever it was, it did not keep them from the joy of giving. They did not wait to give until everything was going well. Nor did they give with a frown. Nor did they say, "We need it just as much here as they do over there."

I've had to fight this over the years as pastor of this church, because we have a strong emphasis on giving to missions, yet in our own local area, we see so many needs to be addressed that the temptation is, why don't we just cut back on giving to those outside of our body, to missions? The fact is, we simply can't. If we're going to be good stewards of God's work and really listen to the Great Commission of our Lord, we can't do that. We have to do what the Corinthians and Macedonians did, and that's simply not just look at our own needs, but look out upon the needs of others. Even in their affliction, when they could have used the financing themselves, they were finding the joy of giving to others.

Paul also says, in this matter of Macedonian churches inspiring the southern churches, that out of extreme poverty they had a wealth of liberality (2 Corinthians 8:2). It welled up in rich generosity. Extreme poverty. They did not wait until they had enough to give. Nor did they

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simply measure liberality by the amount that they were giving. Liberality is always measured by proportion. They were poor, but out of their poverty, they had given liberally.

Not only that, but Paul tells us that, in their inspirational example, they had given, not only according to their means, according to their ability, but they had given beyond their means and beyond their ability. In other words, their gift is inspiring in that it is sacrificial.

I think of the story I heard of the offering plate that was being passed, and a man got out a ten dollar bill and was ready to drop it in. He said to the usher, “I think I can give these ten dollars, and not feel it.” The usher said, “If that’s the case, why don’t you take out a twenty dollar bill and give it and feel it.”

They gave, not only according to their means, they gave beyond their means. Again, there is balance. Some people are foolish in giving and will do extravagant things and not take care of legitimate needs within their own family. Scripture is not telling us that we are to let our children go hungry while we are giving, so that someone can live an extravagant lifestyle. I could talk a lot about some of the fundraising techniques I see in the body of Christ, where widow’s mites are being used to support the extravagant lifestyles of those who pretend to represent the gospel. But there is a sense of recognition of the legitimacy of inspiration, of not only giving according to one’s means but giving beyond them.

Paul also says that their inspiration was that they gave out of free will. In fact, it took no manipulation for the Macedonians to give; “They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing” (2 Corinthians 8:4, NIV).

Paul says that they went beyond anything we thought they would do. “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us” (verse 5, NIV). Again, that’s a great lesson in giving. Before we see what we give as going to someone else, someone else in the body of Christ, we see that gift—

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first of all—as being presented to the Lord. That’s why, at the close of the offering, we bring the gifts forward in this church. It’s to symbolically represent that, after giving them, we first dedicate them to the Lord. We give them to the Lord and then they are dispersed.

It’s the inspiration of others. It is the inspiring example of others that have had a profound impact on my own life. I look back to the days when I was in college and the industrialist R. G.

LeTourneau spoke at our campus. I’ll never forget this great man of God, standing up and sharing the stewardship of his life and how God had impressed upon him, as he made money, as he developed assets, that he should increase his proportion of giving to the Lord as God gave him assets. Prior to that time, I just always took it for granted, growing up in my background, that 10 percent belonged to the Lord and the other 90 percent was yours, to do with however you wanted. And R. G. LeTourneau had the viewpoint that everything belongs to the Lord. He had come to the maturity in his giving and his discipleship where 90 percent of everything he earned was going to the Lord’s Word. And he was living very well on the other 10 percent. That’s such a marvelous example. It’s something I’ve wanted to do in my own life.

W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist church in Dallas, Texas, has been an inspiration to me for something I would like to do. He’s pastored Dallas First Baptist for thirty-five years or something like that. Just a year or two ago, he handed the church a check for all the salary they’d ever paid him over all the thirty-five years of pastoring. How was he able to do that? He was a good investor and he was always taking a little bit and investing it. His investments paid off and ultimately now he’s able to come to the end of his ministry in that church and pay the church back for every dime they’d ever paid him. I think it’s inspiring to see what others are doing.

III. A third principle that the apostle gives is that our concern for excellence should include our giving.

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“So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving” (2 Corinthians 8:6–7, NIV). The Corinthian church was one that perhaps rightly had a sense of well-being in terms of the spiritual gifts—gifts of faith and gifts of knowledge, gifts of speech. They were sort of glad, as a congregation, that the many gifts of the Spirit were in evidence in their congregation. There was an excellent sense of worship. Paul says, “Don’t let your giving be anything less than the other spiritual traits that are in your congregation. As you have all of these in excellence, so also let your giving be excellent.”

The summer I got out of seminary, I went to the east coast to work as a camp counselor in Pennsylvania. I was under the ministry of Ross Rhodes, who I think pastors on the East Coast somewhere. The inevitable phrase Ross used every time he took an offering that summer rings in my mind. He would simply stand up and say, as the ushers came forward, “Jesus is a king and kings don’t beg.” He had a sense of excellence about the offering. There ought to be that kind of excellence in the church where, when we receive an offering, it’s done with dignity and a realization that we are giving to the King of kings and Lord of lords. And we need to give in a proportion that is reflective of the Lord whom we serve.

IV. The fourth thing that the apostle Paul says about the ministry of giving is that our giving is to pattern after the example of Christ.

Verse 8 and 9—especially verse 9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (NIV). William Barclay notes that there are four motivations that people have when they give. Some give from a sense of duty. It’s just habit and they’re plugged in. Others

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give from a sense of self-satisfaction. You see somebody in need and you give to them, then walk away and you feel so good. You saw the need and you responded. “I’m a pretty good person. I really feel good that I did something about that.” Others give out of a sense of prestige. Maybe there’s some recognition associated with giving the gift. The real thing, though, is to give out of love. That’s the focus that’s here with the emphasis on the Lord. Though He was rich—referring to His existence in heaven—yet, for your sake, He became poor.

To see how poor Jesus was, in a financial way, in his earthly existence, you have to look at how many times He borrowed things. Once He borrowed some food to feed the multitude. Another time, He borrowed a coin to give an illustration. When He needed an animal to ride into Jerusalem on, He borrowed a donkey. When He needed a place to be buried, there even had to be a borrowed tomb. Though He was rich, for your sake, He became poor.

It is really out of our giving like the Lord that we enrich others and we enrich the work of God.

V. A fifth principle of giving that the apostle has to share with us is that we should give what we can, even if it was not what we desired.

“And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have” (2 Corinthians 8:10–12, NIV).

I think that, most likely, the situation Paul is referring to would be analogous to what we have done in this church in regard to missionary faith promise commitments, or when we’ve made commitments to the building fund. Sometimes, when those commitments are being made, we step out in faith and we may get just a little bit over our head. Maybe our faith is greater than our

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wisdom. Or maybe it's greater even than our resources. And a few months down the line, we begin looking at it and say, "Maybe I bit off more than I could chew, the time has come, and what I pledged is due. What am I going to do? I don't have enough. I have some, but I don't have enough." That's evidently what's been happening with the Corinthians. They had some, but they don't have enough. Paul's saying, "That's ok. It's not according to what you desire at this point. It's what you have. So give what you have and that will be acceptable to God." With that, he releases, in effect, the Corinthians from giving under any sense of guilt or letting it weigh on their backs like some heavy millstone.

We might also add to this matter of desire and giving, that what you have also relates to the idea of withholding our giving, saying, "I don't have much to give so, therefore, I won't give anything." But there's a sense that the apostle is admonishing us when we have it to give, "Let's give it to the Lord, to His work, to His people."

VI. Another principle: There should be equal sacrifice throughout the body.

Verses 13–15, especially in verse 15 the quote of the Old Testament passage on the gathering of manna among the children of Israel, "He who gathered much did not have too much. And he who gathered little did not have too little" (NIV). A sense of equality. To the extent that it is possible, as we give, all of us should carry a share of responsibility proportionate to what we're able to do.

I've really learned this through our building fund, giving here at the church, probably before our "Together We Build" campaign came along. If you'd have asked me what was the best way that people ought to give toward a building fund or any kind of fund in the church, I'd have said, "You divide the need by the number of people. So, if there's a two-hundred-thousand-dollar need, and you have two hundred people, you'd say, 'Let's all give one thousand dollars.'" The

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problem with that is that it is not biblical. For some people, giving one thousand dollars is like giving a penny. And for other people, giving a thousand dollars is absolutely impossible. So we've learned, as we've gone through stewardship in this church: It's not about equal giving, it's about equal sacrifice.

That reminds me of the story of the man who was making a building fund pledge for his church. He was the wealthiest man in town. He was trying to figure out what he would give. He looked in the Scripture. When he was asked what he was going to give, he said, "I'm going to give the widow's mite." So the deacon, the next Sunday, stood up and announced that the man was going to pay for all the expenses of the whole building project. The man was sitting there, aghast. He said, "How could you say that? I told you I was going to give the widow's mite." The deacon said, "That's what I thought you were doing. The widow gave everything she had."

Equal sacrifice in the body is what Paul is calling for among the Corinthians.

VII. The seventh thing is an important principle in the ministry of giving: We need assurances that the offerings we give will be properly accounted for and administered.

That's the whole focus of verses 16–24. Paul says that he is sending someone to collect this offering, to administer this offering, not only Titus, but two brothers whom he does not name.

One, most likely—many people feel—is Luke: the brother in verse 18 "who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel" (NIV). Then there's still one other person.

Paul explicitly says, in verses 20 and 21, "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (NIV). There's a sense of accountability. We as Christians need to have a sense of giving that we are not simply giving out of an emotional appeal. When you give to the Lord's work, are the persons who are in charge of the ministries you are giving to

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accountable? Do they give an account? What about their personal lifestyle? Do you know anything about that?

The Scriptures are calling us to recognize that the principle of accountability is vital in stewardship. One of the reasons, therefore, that we have the kind of controls we have in this local body is that we do this out of the sense of “whatever we do, the church and spiritual organizations—of all places in this world—should be financially cleaner than a hound’s tooth. There ought not to be any hidden funds. There ought not to be anything in the closet. Everything ought to be out and open and accounted for.” In our church fellowship, for example, all offerings are counted by more than one person present. Every check must have two signatures on it. It’s just kind of a guarantee and a safeguard, so that no one person gets in a vulnerable position. Sometimes, it’s not all that convenient, in a church that’s processing funds, to go down and hunt out that second person. But it’s necessary. Everything in this church is open for anyone’s consideration, in a financial way. Whether you’re a member of this church or you’re coming in as a reporter. If anyone wants to know anything about how this church handles money, we have made it a practice of letting them know. The only thing a person can’t know is if you come and ask what somebody else in the church gave. We recognize the matter of confidentiality before the Lord. There needs to be a sense of accountability.

There is a lot of inequity in the kingdom that concerns me very much. Sometimes, I see believers giving for projects that are really not doing all that much in the kingdom of God; while some of the most fundamental needs go begging, because they’re not represented by a person who—so to speak, from a worldly point of view—knows how to motivate people to give. There is a sense in which we, as individual Christians, need to practice good stewardship and request that our offerings be accounted for by those who receive them.

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VIII. An eighth principle in giving in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is that our enthusiasm is catching.

Our enthusiasm in giving is catching (verses 1–5). The Corinthians had stirred up the Macedonians, originally, just like Paul was saying earlier: The example of others is catching, so now he comes back to the Corinthians in these verses and says “Your enthusiasm in giving is catching because it was you who first stirred up the Macedonians to give.” Paul says, “I don’t want to be disappointed when we come to you.” Especially as some Macedonians came and your enthusiasms was no longer there. Our spirit in giving really reflects out to other people.

On the other hand, if we don’t have a spirit of giving and we have a lack of enthusiasm, that is catching as well. There’s nothing that will kill a worthy project more than for us all to fold our arms when it is represented and not do anything.

IX. A ninth principle that the apostle gives, in verses 6–11, is that those who sow bountifully reap bountifully.

“Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (2 Corinthians 9:6, NIV). Then the rest of the passage goes on to develop that theme.

There are some who take the Scripture and distort it, as they do many other Scriptures, and simply begin to teach the fact that you give God whatever and, “Lord, I place this in the offering and Lord, You said You would return it thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred fold.” I’m all for that, if it would work. No, that’s giving out of a strictly selfish motive. I’ve always felt that people who make that kind of a guarantee should pay their employees a hundred dollars an hour and give their employees and their printing presses and others something more than the minimum wage,

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so that their employees would have the chance to test out the gift of generosity which they're asking others to exercise.

The Lord has many ways to give back to us. That's the great thing. The Lord may give back to us financially. The Lord may give back to us spiritually. What I see the apostle Paul doing here is saying, "When you're sowing this gift, God's going to bring it back with a spiritual harvest that will be to the glory of God." Look at how God could prepare Paul, financially, after he's raised all this offering. We'll see, from scriptural example, what this Scripture actually means.

When this offering had been given, the apostle Paul went with it to Jerusalem. He had eight delegates with him from the churches which he had founded. They brought the offering, presented it to the church, and Paul went to the temple and was arrested. Guess what? He gets two years of free room and board! Then everybody wants to take a cruise. Who doesn't want to cruise the Mediterranean? Paul gets to cruise the Mediterranean at no expense. He even gets to take two people along with him for free. A prison ship bound for Rome. He gets to Rome and spends time in a house for two years, at his own expense. God provided for him. But more than that, the harvest Paul had in those years, spiritually, was dynamic and powerful.

When we sow, we're going to enjoy great reaping. I become interested in what I'm investing in. When I'm investing in the Lord's work, I become very interested in it and very glad to see a return.

It's a wonderful time in life when we come to the point when we're no longer asking, "How much should I give God and how much should I give myself?" Rather, it's a great moment when we can say, "All is the Lord's and, what does He want me to live on?" He wants me to be a hilarious giver, and that's exactly what I want to be, a cheerful giver.

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X. The tenth and last principle in this passage is found in verses 12–15. It is the principle that our giving should result in praise being given to God.

“This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:12–15, NIV).

Our giving will result in praise being given to God. Who’s going to give the praise? The people that have received the gift are going to be praising the Lord. And we’re going to be praising the Lord for the harvest it’s had. Just like the Macedonian and Achaian churches never met the saints at Jerusalem, but they gave, even without knowing them, so that God’s name might be praised and a need might be met.

Every need is a sign of life and growth. Body, mind, and soul have their needs, and they must be met continually. A ministry that is constantly in need of funds is alive and growing and going somewhere. A dead ministry has no need for funds and will not bother you. Whatever we give can never be compared to what God has given us. His indescribable gift. All true Christian giving flows out of the character of God, who has lavished upon us His great love.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, thank You for these moments we’ve had to share around Your Word today, and the development of discipleship in our life through giving. There are persons here, Lord, who have never known the joy of giving or the discipline of giving in their own life. May this be kind of a freeing day, as we come face to face with Your Word and with Your nature. Lord, it’s our heart’s

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desire to bless Your work, to bless Your people both here and in far, distant places. I'm so glad that we can have a part in Your work. I'm so glad that you didn't endow the church, when You ascended into heaven, with a permanent gift that would always pay the church interest, so we would never have to give anything. It's in giving and in making sacrifices that we discover some of the real delightful commitments and blessings of our Christian experience. So thank You for the privilege. For those who are here today in financial need themselves, we pray that You, the God of all grace, and the God who owns everything, will supply abundantly for their need. Even in the midst of their poverty, we pray that, rather than being turned in upon themselves, they would find some way—even if it's not financial, but some way—to reach out and become a giver in their own life. Bless them. Let them have the confidence that You are going to supply their needs. That You who see a sparrow fall to the ground are aware of their need and you're going to meet it and bless them. Help us, Lord, in the giving of our time, in the giving of our talents, in the giving of our resources, that Your kingdom and Your glory might come. We ask this through Christ Jesus our Lord, who love us. Amen.