

## 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 – The Grace of Giving

Imagine the following scene: Bill joins a group of his friends in the fellowship hall after church. “How are you, Bill?” asks his friend Allan, smiling as he shakes Bill’s hand. “So, tell me,” says Allan, “how much money did you make last week?” Suddenly, Bill’s smile turns to wood and, as politely as possible, he says, “Uh, that’s not really any of your business.” A few moments later, Bill walks away from the group, muttering to himself about the nerve of some people. “The next thing he’ll want to know is how much I spent on my new car and how much I gave to the church last year. He must be nuts!”

Most of us would probably react the way Bill did in that situation. We’d be shocked if anyone seriously asked us such a question over coffee after church. We wouldn’t dream of asking others the same. Like Bill, most of us tend to think our money is our own personal business. We are private about how much we make and how much we give, and we respect the rights of others to keep those matters private as well.

Whatever we may think about that, however, we need to realize one simple and Biblical truth when it comes to money. How much we earn and/or give may or may not be a personal matter, but it is without question, a spiritual matter.

If you don’t believe it, then try this simple Bible knowledge quiz. Here’s a simple statement, and you decide if it’s true or false: “The Bible says more about money than it does about prayer.” Is that true or false?

The correct answer is “true.” As one person figured out, there are 532 verses in the Bible as a whole about praying, and there are 1539 verses about money and giving. There is no doubt that money and giving are deeply spiritual matters.

God—as the Bible teaches us from the very beginning—is the owner and landlord of everything. All we have and own is a gift, a loan, on rent or lease, from Him. We are managers, or stewards, of what He has given us. We are called to productively and joyfully acquire, use, give, and share with others the very best of our time, abilities and possessions in the service of God’s kingdom. We are managers of God’s resources. We have no choice in the matter. We can only choose what kind of managers we are going to be: faithful or faithless. So today let’s focus on this deeply spiritual question: what does it mean to be a faithful manager of God’s resources when it comes to giving?

As we’ve already said, the Bible says a lot about money and giving. It’s the one area of life about which Jesus had more to say than anything else. It was also a subject the apostle Paul repeatedly raised in the churches. In fact, though we read only 15 verses from his second letter to the church in Corinth, he devotes all of chapters 8 and 9 to this matter. There really is nothing new under the sun, is there? Giving has always been a major subject for discussion, or evasion, in most congregations. In Corinth it was no different.

In Corinth, however, Paul raised the subject for a specific reason. The church in Jerusalem, the mother church of Corinth and all the other churches God planted through Paul’s mission, was in financial need. The people in Corinth had started previously a collection for the distressed Christians in Jerusalem, but it failed. Paul is now encouraging them to finish the collection that they had started.

Paul gave them two powerful examples of grace in giving. Look what has happened in other churches, he said, especially in the Macedonian churches: Philippi and Thessalonica. These churches are suffering even now because they are proclaiming and following Jesus as Lord, and a lot of their members have taken severe financial blows because of their faith; yet, they have given eagerly and generously for this collection.

And if that is not enough to get you fired up—you who, after all, aren’t suffering at all: neither in terms of your faith or your finances—don’t ever forget the example of Jesus our

Savior and Lord who, **“though He was rich, yet for your sakes ... became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich,”** so that we might enjoy all the riches of God’s grace: forgiveness and salvation and eternal life! It is in this context that God teaches us about giving but notice that the biggest thing we learn about it is that our use of money and the way we give is a deeply spiritual matter. Did you catch the language Paul uses to describe it? It comes down to the one word that lies at the core of the Christian faith: **“grace.”**

Giving is connected to grace. Giving is a sign that you **“get it,”** that you understand grace, and that you truly believe what God has done for us in Jesus. Grace is God’s attitude of undeserved favor toward sinners; it also means God’s unearned mercy powerfully working within us. Faithful management of God’s resources, then, is part of a relationship created by grace. It is not governed by rules—you must do this and you must give that—but by grace, that is, by our relationship to God in Christ Jesus. How much we earn and how much we give, then, are deeply spiritual matters. We cannot go from paycheck to paycheck without thinking carefully about what we are doing with our money. We cannot use God’s gifts without carefully considering the ways in which our actions affect others.

No, Paul ties the simple act of opening a wallet or purse, of writing a check or giving online, to ultimate spiritual truths. The uncomplicated act of sharing and giving is a reflection of our spiritual maturity. Giving, at its core, is more than helping and serving others. Giving, at its core, is worship, a part of our thanksgiving and praise to God.

So, here’s the question we now need to ask, and ask again: how can we worship God, how do we reflect spiritual maturity, when it comes to giving? And then Paul gives us at least four basic and practical principles to guide us in gracious giving.

First, a faithful manager of God’s resources gives cheerfully. Most of us know what it feels like to give reluctantly, grudgingly or regretfully. We know the budget needs of our church, so we pledge accordingly. But in our hearts, we resent the church for expecting so much. Then there are all the offerings on Sunday to various important causes, and does it never stop?

But that’s not the kind of giving God requires of us. He wants us to give gratefully and eagerly, smiling as broadly as Ebenezer Scrooge did on Christmas morning when he found he still had a chance to give and to show love to others. People who understand grace don’t view giving as a sort of tax, an unpleasant necessity, or an unmentionable subject. Instead, giving naturally flows out of hearts that have been warmed by the love of the Lord.

If you have ever tried chipping ice off a glacier, you know it’s a fruitless task. But if you allow the sun to warm that same glacier and begin to melt it, then, before you know it, the water flows freely. That’s how it is with Christian giving. That’s why there is rarely such a thing as a financial problem in the church. A financial problem is a symptom of a spiritual problem. God has plenty of money lying locked up in the bank accounts and pockets of His people. When the hearts of His people are thawed by the wonder of His love, the gifts naturally begin to flow. What we give is a reflection of what is in our hearts.

Look at the Macedonian churches, Paul writes Corinth. The collection for the mother church in Jerusalem was not a sort of tax to them. They gave, he writes, **“with overflowing joy”** and **“entirely on their own.”** Paul writes that he didn’t have to beg them to give but they **“urgently pleaded with us for the privilege (the grace) of sharing in this service to the saints.”** They asked: **“Where do we sign up?”**

**“God,”** writes Paul in chapter 9:7, **“loves a cheerful giver.”** Not tearful, but cheerful. Literally, that means **“hilarious.”** God’s people are a people who laugh and dance—and give—in gratitude for grace.

A faithful manager of God’s resources, says Paul, also gives generously. **“Out of the most severe trial,”** he reminds the church in Corinth, **“[the] overflowing joy [of the Macedonian churches] and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity”** (8:2). To give generously means that we give proportionately.

Notice that Paul does not talk about specific amounts. In the Old Testament, people were expected to tithe, that is, to give 10% of everything they earned back to the Lord. But neither here nor anywhere in the New Testament are we given a fixed amount. We are asked to give as the Lord has prospered us; as our love for Him dictates; as managers of His wealth; as those who have been rescued by Him from utter bankruptcy before God. The responsibility of that decision lies with us.

Of course, this doesn't make it easy, especially when you don't feel rich. Many of us are good at complaining about money worries as anyone else. It isn't always easy to make ends meet. There's the mortgage, the cars, a demanding business. There's even the Christian school, which leads in many cases to both parents having to work in order to afford that.

But God knows that. God does not ask more of us than we can give. He does ask us to keep a constant check of our expenses and to be honest about what it is that some of us think prevents us from giving generously. If you keep careful track of all your expenses—remember, now, that you are God's manager, which means you ought to have some good idea of that—then what is the real situation? Is it indeed the high cost of living that gets in the way of our generous giving so that we conclude we just can't give what the church or what others need? Or is it the cost of our high living?

The third thing about money and giving is that we are called to give sacrificially. "For I testify," Paul writes about the Macedonians, "that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability." It doesn't matter how much it is, because for each person that would be different. But it does matter that it should cost us something. After all, if God's giving cost Him the life of His only Son, how could our giving ever be cheap? That doesn't make any sense. A faithful manager of God's resources will make attempts to give sacrificially.

The Christian community in Macedonia was poor by anybody's standards, and yet they gave beyond their means, even in the midst of "severe trial," as Paul calls it. They simply shared the same spirit of sacrifice which was in their Master and Savior. Their giving was stamped with His character.

That means especially, as the Bible often tells us, that we give our first fruits to God. In other words, God wants and deserves our first and our best. He deserves more than our leftovers, whether we are talking in terms of our money or, for that matter, our time or our talents.

Especially when it comes to our giving, it means we do willingly what our federal and state governments ask us to do when it comes to paying taxes. If you get a paycheck, they take it off the top. You have nothing to say about it. You just have to make do with what's left. Giving sacrificially means at the very least that when it comes to the needs of God's church and kingdom and people, we also take it off the top. And we do that not because we have to but because we want to, and we make do with what's left. If that means an old car instead of a new one, or if that means hamburger instead of steak on the table, it's no big deal! No big deal at all, that is, compared to what God in Jesus gave for us.

Finally, says Paul, a faithful manager of God's resources gives selflessly. That is to say, we give at all because we have first given ourselves to the Lord. Listen again to Paul's description of the generosity of the Macedonians: "... they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord ..."

Here Paul reminds us that we cannot buy God off. We cannot buy God's favor even with all the money in the world. He points to the secret of giving that we give ourselves first to the Lord. It brings us full circle, doesn't it? Faithful management of God's resources is a relationship, a unique relationship grounded in our union with Christ Jesus. "I have been crucified with Christ," writes Paul in Galatians 2:20, "and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." What a wonderful relationship: perfect love with imperfect gratitude, but gratitude and

**giving even so. All because of a love that never fails: God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Cheerfully, generously, sacrificially and selflessly—that's how God calls us to exercise the grace of giving. Such giving is the thermometer that measures our love for the Lord. Such giving is the mark of our spiritual maturity. Such giving is the evidence of our faithfulness as managers of God's resources.**

**But more than that, such giving takes us to the heart of God, 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." So maybe what we make and what we give is personal or private. Maybe it is not everybody's or anybody's business. But it is, always and above all, God's business, isn't it? So may our earning and giving earn glory for, and give glory to, our God and Savior. His grace be with us, and His grace flow from us!**