

Abundant Generosity

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II Corinthians 9:6-15

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

“All through Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of a [person’s] character and how he [she] handles his [her] money.”

This morning, we complete a mini-series on the generosity of our Lord and of us, His people, as we have been considering the “we God wants us to be.” Now I recognize that churches often use euphemisms for money. A euphemism is the substitution of a mild word or expression for one that is blunter or distasteful. So we use euphemisms for money, such as giving from our resources or taking an offering or a collection, or we speak of our treasure, as in time, talent and treasure. Today, the euphemism for money that I will be using is the word “money!” Money is important to us and we think about it a lot.

Ron Blue says there are five things we can do with our money. We can use it for our lifestyle, save it, give it away, pay debt with it and pay taxes with it. The Bible teaches us how to manage all five areas in the use of our money. In fact, over two thousand verses in the Bible speak about money and possessions, and some sixteen out of twenty-eight parables of our Lord touch on money.¹ As Jesus said, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be

also,” and as Dick Halverson, former Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, once said, “Jesus Christ said more about money than about any other single thing because, when it comes to a [person’s] real nature, money is of first importance.... Money,” Dick said, “is an exact index to a [person’s] true character. All through Scripture there is an intimate correlation between the development of a [person’s] character and how he [she] handles his [her] money.”

There was once a college student who had an answering machine in his room. His message said. “Hi, this is Dave. If this is Mom or Dad, please send money. If it’s a friend, you still owe me money. If it’s the student-loan office, you didn’t loan me enough money. If it’s a female, leave your number and I’ll call you back soon; and don’t worry, I have plenty of money.”² So, we put our money where our priorities are. We know that some among us are just fine in the financial aspect of our lives and for others of us, due to job loss or cutbacks at work or loss of

² Brian Brauknight Devotions to Leave You Smiling (Nashville: Dimensions for Living 2002) p. 51.

¹ <http://ron-blue.com/>

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investment income, finances are a challenging part of our lives. So we approach the topic of money with the humility that knows ultimately our well-being is in the hands of the Lord who loves us. And, as we talk about the giving facet of the use of our money, we recognize this has an impact on all the other facets of personal financial management – our lifestyles, our savings, our debts and our taxes.

Our text is from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, in which he invited the Christians in the town of Corinth to give money for the relief of starving Christians in Jerusalem. When we come to the ninth chapter, we discover the Apostle Paul offers some preliminary principles about giving. In fact, many of the verses in this chapter are very famous and for good reason. For example, verse six: "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." When we give of our money, our Lord uses it to bring forth a harvest of blessing. Then, verse seven: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Of course, you've heard the phrase God loves a cheerful giver. I get a kick out of that verse because I have heard so many Christians grumble about talking about money. The word

translated "cheerful" comes from the Greek word *hilaros* from which we have the English words hilarious and hilarity.

God loves the giver who gives with a sense of hilarious joy—which is the very spirit in which our Lord gives to us! There is the story of a pastor who was speaking about giving to the ministry of the congregation. He asked the congregation to please stand up. Then he said, "Reach your hand into the pocket or purse of the person standing next to you and take out his or her wallet." People were puzzled but took out their neighbor's wallets. Then the pastor said, "Now I invite you to give the way you've always wanted to give!" Now that's *hilaros* – generosity with hilarity. In fact, "cheerful" actually under-translates *hilaros*. Not just cheerful or happy but positively elated to be able to give money to meet the needs of God's people and to trust God to meet our own needs, as well.

Now the next three verses are summed up by verse 11, in what you may call "the grace cycle," and Pete explained to us last week that grace is the key to generosity. "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us." The grace cycle is a three-stage sequence. Stage one, God gives grace to you and me – enriches us in every way. Stage two, in abundant

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generosity we pass on to others the grace given to us, and stage three, thanksgivings go up to God for His grace and the grace passed on by God’s people. We are heading into the wonderful week of Thanksgiving in our country, and what we are invited to do is to be very aware of the grace given to us and the grace passed through us, which will lead others to give thanks to God for the grace given to them and for them to pass it on to still others. So the grace cycle—God’s grace to us, through us and back to God in thanksgiving—goes round and round in increasing joy. Of course, at times, people use guilt and not grace to motivate giving. I know of a religious community that used to post on the bulletin board in the back of its sanctuary what every member gave the previous week. It was motivational, to be sure. Guilt works. But *hilaros*, hilarity and cheerfulness in giving, are never motivated by guilt but by a genuine gratitude for the grace of the Lord who loves us. It’s grace received and grace passed on.

I have found it very helpful, in thinking through practical matters of generosity and the giving of money to the church and to other organizations, to understand the basic patterns of giving that we discover in the Bible. Three of them are perhaps the most important: proportional giving, offerings of generosity and almsgiving.

We learn about proportional giving in verses such as II Corinthians 8:3, in which we read, “For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.” Proportional giving is giving “according” to our means. Another way to understand proportionality is the word “percentage.” The classic percentage giving we see practiced by God’s people is ten percent of one’s income, which is known as the tithe. Malachi 3:10a says, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house.” And Jesus is quoted in Matthew 23:23 as affirming the significance of justice, mercy and faith while also affirming the ten-percent tithe. The tithe is a substantial generous gift based on one’s trust that God is the one who will truly continue to meet our needs. Tithing is a guide to graceful giving and not a guilt trip. In fact, if you are *hilaros*, cheerful, with a lesser percentage, better to go with what you may offer with joy. Proportional or percentage giving is the systematic planned gift. It takes some thinking because it is determined by multiplying whatever proportional number or percent we choose times our annual income. It is the basis for our planned giving, our estimate-of-giving pledge to the church.

If the first pattern for giving is planned proportional giving, growing for some of us beyond the ten percent tithe, the second

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pattern is the offering of generosity. If proportional giving is planned, the offering of generosity is more spontaneous. It is given when the Lord melts your heart. The Book of Acts reports, "There was a Levite...whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas.... He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:36-37). The needs of people melted Barnabas's heart and he gave. That's an offering of generosity. The offering of generosity may be offered to particular needs that arise in the life of the congregation but also in the wider world, from Haiti Earthquake Relief to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, the National MS Society and many other forms of ministry and mission. The offering of generosity is one practical way we pass on the grace we have been given.

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The third pattern for giving is almsgiving. Jesus said, "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3). An alm, in the day of Jesus, was money given to the poor. Almsgiving, as Jesus taught it, is the giving of money or other resources to a person you know to be in need, but giving to them secretly so neither the gift recipient nor anyone else knows who gave it (including the church and the IRS!). There is no tax deduction or receipt for such a gift, as it is offered in secret.

Almsgiving is, in essence, one practice of people eyes—the eyes of Jesus for people—that sees people in need and passes on the grace that has been given as the grace cycle continues.

So why give proportionally in a planned way? Or give an offering of generosity? Or give in the practice of almsgiving? We give out of gratitude for the grace given to us. As we pass on the grace, we continue the grace cycle that starts with God. And we remember that some of us are blessed to give and some of us are in turbulent waters, and the call on our lives at the present time is to receive. We remember there are five ways to use our money: live on it, save it, give it, pay debt with it and pay taxes with it, and when we adjust any one of those five ways, it affects the other four. So we approach the management of the money God entrusts to us with a large measure of humility and much thought.

My friend Jim Mead offers four major guidelines to help us determine the level of the giving aspect of our money management. I find them a very practical way to approach the "so what" of this matter. These are not four points made to stir a person to give based on emotionalism or guilt. They are four points to guide you as you participate in the grace cycle, which leads you to want to pass on the grace that has been given to you with thanksgiving.

The first fruits concept teaches that the first of our income is God's sacred money.

Foundational giving means what you decide is your basic, essential financial commitment to Jesus.

1. Prioritize your giving by giving from the first part of your income rather than from “what’s leftover.”

Nehemiah 10:35: “We obligate ourselves to bring the first fruits of our soil and the first fruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD.” Just as the Hebrew farmers of old gave to God from the first part of their harvest, so we learn to give from the first part of our income. As a result, we, like those Hebrew people, learn to actually trust God to meet our needs, because we are no longer giving from our excess what’s left over but from that which is precious to us. We know very well that if we pay all the bills and then give what was leftover to Christ, there would never be much left to give. As Jim Mead put it, “Sometimes we find ourselves feeling a bit resistive when the subject of giving comes up because frankly we want to be lord of our own decisions about how we spend our money. The first fruits concept teaches that the first of our income is God’s sacred money. We don’t want it in our house, in our checking account; we don’t want it invested in our stuff. We want to do with it what God wants us to do with it: sow it, plant it to bear fruit for God in the lives of other people.” Our first fruits are the first check written (or first money transfer) rather than from what is left over after paying all the bills!

2. Set a foundational giving level of a percentage of your income, proportional to your income and resources (II Corinthians 8:3).

Foundational giving means what you decide is your basic, essential financial commitment to Jesus. Set a target percentage. You may not be giving at that level now, but it is the level to which you will grow, such as four, six or eight percent or the biblical ten percent tithe. Set that target at a level you will grow to with *hilaros*, with the cheerful hilarity of one who wants to grow as a graceful giver. Do you know what percent of your income you actually give to the Lord’s work right now? My friend Jim Mead says, “Establish your foundational giving by deciding what a worthy gift is in relation to your personal financial world (knowing in these days of economic challenges for some people that care of the home is job one). Determine what’s worthy by praying about it, and by talking with your spouse about it, if you are married. [And, if you are married, show extraordinary respect to your spouse as you seek to come to an agreement that is acceptable to you both, even if it means one of you chooses to yield to the other in what you give or don’t give.] You should probably expect God to ask you to do something that will impact your lifestyle.” Make this your foundational level of giving, your target percentage. You may not give it

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- Jim Mead

this year or next year, but you can have a deliberate plan to reach it over time.

3. Growing in giving by adding an additional percentage of your annual income to your giving each year until you reach your prayerfully determined target percentage (2 Corinthians 8:12).

This is pretty clear. From Step 2, set a target percentage, your foundational giving, such as 10 percent. Then, determine your actual present giving as a percentage of your income and resources. Again, Jim Mead: "Most of us have never gotten serious enough about what we give to God's work to actually have goals about it—we just kind of give, and that's it. One of the keys to becoming a faithful giver to God's work is planned progress each year. Giving an additional one percent a year (or more as the Lord leads you) until you reach your prayerfully determined goal is a way of doing that. If you make \$30,000 a year, one percent is only \$25 a month. If you make \$60,000 a year, it is \$50 a month, and so on. Most of us dribble away that much money every month but, if we set a prayerfully determined goal, it will give us a sense of self-control and self-respect to be working toward a godly goal."

4. Increasing your freedom to give by reducing your debts and controlling your lifestyle (II Corinthians 9:11).

There is a lot of anxiety about this point—credit card

debt, mortgages, car loans, tuition payments, you name it. Many of us float in a world of debt. "Most American Christians can prayerfully set any percentage of their incomes they want, but they are not capable of actually giving it because they are too much in debt and are living beyond their means" [Mead]. I heard of one fellow who said that he was so heavily in debt that he is known as the "Leaning Tower of Visa." When our debts are too great in relation to our income, then the seed that God intends for us to invest in God's work ends up going to pay for the debt. If our debt level overly constrains our living and our giving, then we need a strategy to bring the debt down to a level we can handle.

I asked a woman in Fairhope, Alabama how her church is doing. She replied, "It's bubblin'!" She said, "It's not just the pastor, although he is great, or the programs which we enjoy, but it's the people who are bubblin' with the sense that God is up to something with a sense of expectation and anticipation that our church has an exciting future." I thought to myself, Wow! What a perfect description of our congregation here at VPC! We are a 'bubblin' with the Spirit of the Lord who loves us, and there is a wonderful spirit among us. Why give to this church? Because we want to participate in the grace cycle, passing on the grace we have received, and one way to do it is to support the grace

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On a practical "p.s.," our congregation requests those of us who support its ministry and mission to prepare the estimate of giving pledge card and return it as soon as possible. Our congregation's leaders need to know our intentions so that they may make financially responsible plans for 2011.

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