

PRODIGALITY WITHOUT PRESSURE

by Ray C. Stedman

The place to begin with any doctrinal matter in the New Testament is with Jesus' clear and simple commands, since these have the force of injunction to any heart that is subject to him. He said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven," {cf, Matt 6:19-20}. He also said, "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they [those friends] may welcome you into the eternal habitations," {cf, Luke 16:9 RSV}. Each of these commands is supported by a brief, perceptive observation on our Lord's part which, like a powerful searchlight, stabs through the shadowed darkness of our luxury-loving, materialistic thinking, and calls us back to sane, balanced living.

Now let us move on to examine what Paul has to say on this same subject. Surely there is no heresy more absurd than the idea that Paul changed Christianity from the simple thing that Jesus taught into a complex religion, that he took from and added to the words of Jesus so that what he teaches is quite different from what Jesus said. Paul never changed a thing! He absolutely disclaims any possibility of such a thing on his part. Again and again in his letters he says that the gospel he preached was not one that he invented; it was no fabrication on his part. He delivered, he says, only that which he had received. He wrote to the Galatians that his gospel did not come through men, or by means of men, but directly from Jesus Christ. In the first two verses of the sixteenth chapter of First Corinthians we may see how accurately Paul grasped the great principles underlying Christian giving which Jesus taught, and how specifically he applies them in an extremely practical manner.

Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come. {1 Cor 16:1-2 RSV}

The Corinthian letters reflect closely the conditions that prevail in California more than any other New Testament epistle. More and more, we Californians are called on to live under Corinthian conditions. In many ways these two Corinthian epistles could be accurately addressed, "The First and Second Epistles to the Californians," for California and Corinth have very much in common. They are both resort centers, given over to the pursuit of pleasure, and much of that pleasure takes a sexual form. So, here in the first epistle to the Californians, in these two verses we find conditions that also apply to us.

This is confirmed at the very beginning of this letter. Verse 2 of the first chapter says this letter is

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. {1 Cor 1:2 RSV}

There is a clear-cut inclusiveness here that touches local assemblies anywhere and everywhere, through the whole course of the Christian age. So, on the subject of giving, we shall note carefully here the perpetual principles that underlie Christian giving anywhere.

There are three such principles, and they are absolutely necessary to true Christian giving. There may be giving without these principles, but it is simply not Christian giving.

The first of these principles we may call the motivation of an inward impulse. It is seen simply in the fact that in the original Greek in which our New Testament was written, there is absolutely no break whatsoever between the closing verse of Chapter 15 and the opening verse of Chapter 16, no break at all, not even a comma or a period. It goes right on from the one sentence to the other. Let us read it that way.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain [and] now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.
{1 Cor 15:58-16:1 RSV}

If you are familiar with this fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, you know that here is one of the mightiest theological treatises ever to come from the pen of Paul. He is talking here about the supreme glory of the Christian life, the sharing of a resurrected life. As a matter of fact, that is the theme of the whole letter. First Corinthians 1:9 says, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The apostle goes on to develop that theme throughout the whole course of the letter, correcting certain things, and encouraging certain others, to close with this mighty peroration concerning the resurrection and the fact that Christians together share a resurrected life.

I sat with a number of men, gathered from all parts of Northern California, discussing matters concerning the advancement of Christian faith. One man told, in excited language, of what was going on in his locality and said, "It thrills me to know that I am part of a world-wide revolution!" There is no more apt description of genuine Christian faith than that.

We are part of a world-wide revolution, a revolutionary ferment, that is permeating society and making drastic changes in human life wherever it strikes in power!

It is a great thing to think that, as we gather here on this Sunday morning, other Christians, gathering in remote parts of the world -- some out in the open, some huddled together in places where they dare not let the meeting be known, others gathered in great, ornate cathedrals -- wherever they may be, wherever there are hearts that know and love Jesus Christ, we are together sharing a resurrected life. That is the glory of Christianity. It is what might be called *The Fellowship of the Changed Heart*, and Paul says that this new life is to be the supreme motivation for any activity in Christian life. In the direct impingement of one truth here upon another, Paul simply means to indicate that the shared life is also a sharing life, that if you are at all moved by the indwelling life of Jesus Christ, if you sense at all his life in you, it will lead to this kind of activity. In other words, Christian activity never stems from the imperative of a divine command. It is not because God has said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" {Mark 16:15a KJV} that men and women have gone out into the far corners of the earth into jungles and unpleasant areas of the world with the Christian message. It is not the Great Commission alone that has driven them out, it is not the imperative of a divine command -- it is the impulse of an indwelling Presence! Without that, the command is without any value whatsoever. Paul puts this matter of Christian giving squarely on that basis. It is not the fact that God says to us we are to give -- "Freely ye have received, freely give" {Matt 10:8} -- that is the motivation we depend upon to obtain the funds necessary for the carrying on of Christian work. If that is all we are counting on it is not worth while. But it is the impulse of an inward life, an indwelling Presence, that is the key thing.

No Christian, therefore, who knows the motivation of inward impulse can refrain from giving. To do so raises the suspicion, at least, that one is not a Christian.

I read some time ago of a man who said, "You know, I do not believe in giving. I think I can be as good a Christian without giving as I am with giving. After all, the dying thief never gave anything." The other man said, "Well, there is one difference between you and the dying thief: He was a dying thief; you are a living one."

The motivation on giving must rest squarely upon what God has already given to us in Jesus Christ.

This is the reason why Christians should not resort to the methods of appeal used in the business world to extract funds for Christian enterprises. Worldlings do it, of course, because they do not have this motivation to appeal to, and, without this, there is simply no alternative but to appeal to self-interest, or pride. A great deal of money can be extracted on that basis, but it does not belong in the Christian church. The reason it does not is that there is a quite adequate basis upon which Christian giving must be based -- the impulse of an indwelling life.

Then, there is not only the motivation of an inward impulse, but there is also evident, in these verses, the confrontation of an outward appeal. Look at verse one again:

Now concerning the contributions for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. {1 Cor 16:1 RSV}

Perhaps we need to fill in a bit of the background of this.

If you read the parallel passage to this that occurs in the second letter, and trace the references on this contribution for the saints, you will discover that "the saints" are the Christians in Jerusalem who were going through a very difficult time. A widespread famine had occurred which had created havoc among them and many of them had, literally, been reduced to nothing. Furthermore, a persecution against the church had broken out in Jerusalem and many of these Christians had been deprived, by force, of all their possessions. When word of this was circulated among the other Christian churches in Macedonia, in Galatia, and here in Corinth, the apostle became deeply concerned that they respond to this need, for it was an authentic need.

There is no attempt on the apostle's part to argue the matter or to elaborate on it. He simply assumes that, because there is a need, this need is argument enough in itself. The need should be met by these other Christians, and he simply directs them as to the way to go about it. There is no argument as to whether it ought to be done or not. There is no need for them to pray about it, or to deliberate over the matter. No one else would, or could, meet this particular need; it existed as an outward appeal to these people, an authentic need. There it is, staring them right in the face, making its stark appeal to Christian love, and they cannot resist it.

Perhaps no practice today has done more to destroy true Christian giving than the demand of churches and church leaders that people give to a faceless, impersonal, unspecific fund which is to be distributed by a committee at the committee's whim. To teach people that they should bring their money to the church and pour it into the church treasury without any knowledge of where it goes, of how much goes here, and how much goes there, is to defeat one of the most vital factors in Christian giving -- the need for the knowledge of a specific, definite need that exists.

One of the results of this evil practice has been to develop what can only be called *Christian gullibility*. The ease with which Christians give to causes which are simply not worthy of any kind of support whatsoever is appalling. Simply because an emotional appeal is made, or some vibrant personality has told a tear-jerking story, the money comes flowing forth without any awareness or any certainty that real need exists. Yet one of the basic factors in true Christian giving is to determine that there is an authentic need.

I am astonished at the causes to which Christian people sometimes give their money. A *Reader's Digest* article a few years ago told of an enterprising young man who stood by the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D. C. and took up a collection for the widow of the Unknown Soldier! The fact that he got a considerable sum of money is a humorous, but almost tragic, illustration of the gullibility of people in this matter giving. Unfortunately, Christians are not at all exempt. We must know that a real need exists, and the need itself, appealing to the inward impulse of a changed heart, becomes the second factor in true giving.

Now, in these days of world-wide communication, it is possible to be simply swamped with legitimate appeals. We learn of needs all over the world; they make their demand upon us and many of them, most of them, are quite legitimate needs. And we find ourselves unable to respond to all that comes to our door. But there are always needs which are unmistakably our needs -- our responsibilities -- which must be met.

We cannot, of course, meet all needs everywhere, and Paul is not saying this. What he is pointing out here was a need that was this church's particular responsibility. No one else could meet it. This church, together with the other churches of Galatia and Macedonia, were to meet it. So there are certain needs that are our prime responsibility which no one else can meet.

Our own local work, for instance -- as many of you know, our church has been limping along in this area for some considerable time now. Last week's offering was four hundred dollars short of what our weekly need is. Here is a need that is our responsibility, no one else's. We must meet it if the work is to go ahead at all. We

have the right to examine such expenditures to see whether they are pared to the bone -- a minimum expenditure for a maximum effort -- but, if they are, then it is our responsibility to meet it. Our own missionary commitments are to be met. Our Missionary Board met the other day and felt strongly impelled to establish the policy that when young people out of our own congregation are called of God to go out to the mission field, we must certainly meet their needs from this church. That is a perfectly proper objective and includes others who are laid on our hearts as they come to visit us from time to time. These are our responsibilities, and God calls on us to meet them. The physical and material needs of the people we meet who are in need, these are our responsibility. It is this confrontation of an outward appeal that provides the opportunity for the manifestation and fulfillment of the inward impulse to give. We cannot ignore it.

James says if you turn away from a man who is standing right at your door, with his need evident in every line of his face, and you say to him "Go away. Be warmed and filled" {cf, Jas 2:16}, then do not bother to call yourself a Christian, for that is not Christianity.

There is not only the motivation of the inward impulse, and the confrontation of the outward appeal, but also evident here is the demonstration of a theological conviction. Paul asks the Corinthians to take up contributions at once so that contributions need not be made when he comes. Now that is an interesting thing. Nothing shows how far removed we are from New Testament principles {more} than this verse. Paul says to these Corinthians, "I want no emotional or personal pressure that my presence among you may exert to sway you in this matter of giving. I do not want this put on the basis of a personality appeal. I want the whole thing taken care of before I come, that, when I come, there be no collections taken at all. "For I want no one to give out of the sentimental or emotional appeal of a personal presentation, but let your giving come," he implies, "from the conviction that this is what God wants you to do -- a theological conviction."

In other words, just as I must have and you must have a theological conviction about justification by faith, or about the atonement of Jesus Christ, or the deity of Christ, or the inspiration and the infallibility of the Scriptures -- just as you have a theological conviction about the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in your life, and you have a theological conviction about the power of prayer, so you must have a theological conviction about the need for giving.

That it is something that Jesus Christ, in his Lordship, and in his wisdom, asks of us individually, and personally. This should be the basis of our activity, so that, as Paul says, it does not make any difference whether someone comes or not, the giving will be done, nevertheless.

What a rebuke this is to our modern fund-raising techniques! We employ a special high-powered man to come in and raise funds on the basis of his known reputation as a colorful personality. But high-pressure means, designed to extract money from uncommitted and undisciplined Christians, are totally unscriptural, and utterly unspiritual. Paul says, "I do not want anything like that among you -- no pressure at all as a result of my presence. Let this come as a deep-seated theological conviction out of your own hearts."

That puts it on a quite different basis. There are the perpetual principles that forever must govern Christian giving:

1. The motivation of an inward impulse,
2. The confrontation of a definite need, and
3. The demonstration of a theological conviction.

But now there are certain practical procedures the Paul gives us which we will take very quickly here, and notice very carefully. In these, he outlines, in four highly practical ways, the actual procedure of giving.

Note, first, that giving is to be persistent. "On the first day of every week" it is to be done. There must be, Paul says, a repetitive regularity about our giving that reflects the orderliness and the systematic character of God. This is what God does. He acts in an orderly way. God has ordained summer, winter, the changing seasons, seed time and harvest, the day, the week, the month and the year; all of them repetitively regular to remind us of certain great truths that we need to hear again and again. He set aside the first day of the week, the day of our Lord's resurrection, to remind us that we are to operate from the compassionate impulse of the

indwelling life of Jesus Christ that keeps us from turning away as we would otherwise do from the demands of human needs around us. This first day of the week is set aside for that purpose, and what better day could there be? This day that we take to worship God in, to remind ourselves of the new basis of living that has been made available to us in Jesus Christ. What better time to settle our account with God, as an act of worship, than the first day of the week?

This has been given to us, Paul is suggesting, to deliver us from the habit of spasmodic, impulsive giving, where we simply respond to some emotional appeal and put our hand in our pocket and give what we find there. It is not to be done that way. It is to be regular, systematic, persistent, week after week after week -- a continual, holy habit of giving.

The second procedure is that giving must be personal. Not only persistent, but personal. "On the first day of every week each of you" -- in other words, there is a universal inclusiveness about this matter of giving. It is not addressed to the rich only, or to adults only, but it includes rich and poor, young and old. No one is excluded from this. Jesus received the widow's mite, the smallest possible gift, to indicate that even the poorest are not excluded from giving. We are all to give, and the reason is, because God always associates the gift with the giver. Giving, in other words, is an intensely personal thing.

No one else can give for me. I cannot give by proxy any more than I can court by proxy. This is the month of June, and in June we see the results of programs that have been carried on, more or less in secret, for many months before -- we call it courting. Any of you who have engaged in such a program know that you never send someone else to do it for you. The classic story of John Alden and Miles Standish stands as a testimony of the folly of that procedure. Why? Because courting is the expression of a heart of love, and love is a personal thing.

And giving is an expression of an inward life, and life is a personal thing. Money is of absolutely no value to God, none whatsoever, except as it is an expression of life and love from an individual heart. God wants to bless every one of us. That is what he has come to do. God wants to pour into each heart and life the fullness of blessing available in Jesus Christ, and the only way he can bless is to move us to give. So he simply says, no one is to be excluded, all are to give. "Let every one of you on the first day of the week lay aside" -- there is no respect of persons.

Then notice the third procedure here. Giving is to be premeditated. We are to put something aside and store it up. Mr. Way, in his translation says, "form a little hoard." You see how exactly this is in line with what Jesus said. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, ... but lay up [hoard] treasures in heaven," {cf, Matt 6:19-20}. This hoarding is an activity which takes place before the money is brought to the church or sent out. It is a decision made in the home, with thoughtful premeditation, to divide up certain amounts in certain directions. In New Testament days, they would divide their wealth into little piles, piles of goods or food or grain. Today we do not do this. We simply take our check book and divide up certain amounts, but it is the same principle exactly. Let every one, every family, every individual lay by him in store at home; that is, decide first of all where it is to go, and in what amount, and do this as a premeditated act.

Do you see how this utterly shatters our thoughtless practice of impulsive, unplanned giving? That is the reason we are so poor at giving. It has not become important enough to us, we have not seen how God makes this a vital, integral part of Christian experience. This does not mean that it is wrong to respond to a sudden, previously unknown appeal, but we should provide an amount deliberately, beforehand, that we can spontaneously give on such occasions -- but the division is to be made at home.

Then the last thing: Giving is not only to be persistent and personal and premeditated, but it is to be proportionate, "as he may prosper." Here is the New Testament replacement for the Old Testament tithe. In the Old Testament, believers were asked to give 10% of their income, a designated proportion, to the work of God. But, remember, that is the kindergarten practice of giving. Men had to be told how much to give, specifically; it was put on a legal basis. When you come into the New Testament you do not find the tithe carried forward. But proportionate giving is definitely taught. All that Paul is saying here is that as increase in prosperity comes there should be a corresponding increase in proportion. Not simply in the amount, it is not to be any longer 10%, but the proportion increases as God has prospered.

Do not forget that in the New Testament we learn that the basis of our giving is that we owe everything to God. We simply owe everything to him. The carnal, careless Christian who really cares little about the Lordship of Jesus Christ snaps his finger at that kind of truth and goes out and does as he pleases anyway. But the man or woman, the boy or the girl, who has been to the cross and has been broken, who wants to please God in all that he does, is ready to walk in glad obedience to the Lordship of Christ, he will take time to consider what God has done for him and to calculate what he can do in response to the goodness and the blessing of God. That is to be the basis of giving. Now you can see that if we take this seriously it is going to make some demands upon us. It is going to change our habits. But in the light of the blessings that we receive from Jesus Christ we must not view these demands as burdens, but as privileges, for such they are.

Let me close with the story I heard some time ago of a man who complained about his church. He said, "This church costs too much. It is always asking for money. They always need funds down there, and I get so tired of giving." His friend said, "I know how you feel. But some time ago there was a baby born into our family, and as soon as that baby came we discovered that it needed a lot of things -- clothing, food, toys, medicine, so many things. And as that little boy grew, we kept having to pour out money for him. When he went to school we had to buy books, and when he reached his teens and started dating, it cost us a small fortune. But last year, in his junior year in high school, he was killed in an auto accident and since the funeral he has never cost us a penny." He said, "Which relationship do you think we would rather be under?"

As long as this church is a living church, acting as salt in this community, reflecting the life of Jesus Christ, it is going to cost money. The very demands it makes upon us are the means by which the message goes forth. A living church is the most vital need this area, or any other area, can possibly have in these turbulent, frightful days in which we live. May God help us to face our responsibilities in this light and to act out of a deep theological conviction that we are privileged before God to assume a continuing obligation -- not just one week, not just a sporadic gift -- a continuing, week-by-week responsibility to carry his work forward.

Prayer

Loving Lord, how much our hearts have been searched by these words, how much we have been awakened to our need and to thy great heart which longs to pour out blessing upon us. How futile it is, Lord, for us to resist the moving of thy Spirit in this thing; how foolish it is, when the very reason that you have in asking us to give is in order that we might be blessed. Teach us this, and may we respond out of abundance, out of cheerfulness and gladness. In Christ's name, Amen.

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