

# GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

By Steve Zeisler

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Coming to work early one morning, I stopped at a local shop to buy a bran muffin. They cost 65 cents, and I laid a dollar bill on the counter as I was given my muffin. Then temptation began its work in my life, and I decided what I really wanted was two bran muffins. The woman behind the counter laid my change of 35 cents on the counter next to the dollar bill, then rang up the second muffin and said, "That comes to \$1.30." She handed me the second muffin, looked down and saw \$1.35 on the counter, and gave me a nickel, then moved on to the next customer. Now, I knew she had made a mistake, but it was amazing to me how quickly rationalizations arose, unbidden, for being dishonest. I didn't have to work at it! "These bran muffins probably aren't worth 65 cents . . ." "The poor woman will feel embarrassed if I call attention to her inadequacy in front of these other customers, won't she?" "They throw away extra muffins at the end of the day . . ." I had to determine to be honest rather than that being the instinctive choice.

Honesty is required of us. It is one of the significant subjects in the passage before us today. We need to consciously choose, by the grace of God, to allow honesty to be produced in us. Left to ourselves, we will all be tempted to be dishonest and may at times give in to temptation.

The subject we are dealing with is Christian giving in chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians. One of the things I love about the Bible is the human quality that is given to this subject as well as many others. Instead of speaking in theoretical terms, the apostle Paul describes his Macedonian friends and his Corinthian friends as a good example and a shaky example. He shows us Titus and other brothers as those who would take responsibility for leadership, and shares with us his own convictions and the thinking behind them. So we see by example what is right and wrong, and we can be encouraged by what others have chosen.

## **Honesty and generosity**

The two subjects under which we will gather the truth in the passage before us are honesty and generosity. Both are commended to us.

2 Corinthians 8:16-24:

I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. 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.

In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

A delegation of three, carrying the letter of 2 Corinthians, was being sent from Macedonia, probably the city of Philippi, to Corinth. These delegates were coming ahead of Paul, who would shortly follow. At that point the

money the Corinthians had said they would give to the poor in Jerusalem would be collected, together with money other churches had given to the project, and a group of seven, mentioned in Acts 20, would accompany Paul to Jerusalem and deliver the gift. The three are being sent ahead to get the collection organized.

### **Leaders held accountable**

There are some wonderful insights in this paragraph on the subject of giving and the accountability of leaders to do what is right, to have high standards in both receiving money from the saints of God and disbursing it. As a brother or sister in the Lord, you have the right and the responsibility to expect the leadership of any Christian group to be held to high standards of honesty, especially when it comes to acquiring and disbursing funds. Verses 20 and 21 encapsulate Paul's thinking for us.

"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 [to be seen to do what is right] in the eyes of men."

They are going to great lengths to avoid being accused of even the appearance of bad dealings. It's unusual for Paul to say he's concerned about what men think of him. Most of the time he dismisses any responsibility to get the approval of people. He wants only God's approval, and if he doesn't have the approval of men, so be it. But in this case, he goes so far as to do everything possible so that any onlooker, Christian or not, will see that what they are doing is scrupulously honest, so that in no sense will the cause of Christ be discredited. Paul says elsewhere that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. He may have remembered that Judas, as the carrier of the purse of the disciples of Jesus, misappropriated the funds for himself. There have been too many times in all the centuries since when the cause of Christ was treated with disrespect by leaders who were careless at best and dishonest at worst with money.

### **You have the right and the responsibility to expect the leadership of any Christian group to be held to high standards of honesty**

So what does Paul do to make sure there is both honesty and the perception of honesty? One thing he does is to set up a multiplicity of leadership whenever money is being dealt with, so that not just one person is in charge of a project. So he sends three to Corinth, and later a delegation will go with him when he takes the gift to Jerusalem. A number of people are overseeing and helping one another with financial temptations.

Further, we are told that the brothers who are being sent to Corinth have spiritual qualifications. There are two unnamed men in this paragraph. The first, in verses 18 and 19, is a brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. Then in verse 22, another brother is mentioned who has proved in many ways that he is zealous. Although two of the brothers are unnamed, there are spiritual qualifications that stand behind them in carrying out their ministry. They are concerned about the gospel. The first man has a reputation for spreading the word of God and seeing it flourish in the churches throughout Macedonia. The second has a zeal for the things of God and a love for the people of God. And Titus is also commended for his long-standing service and godliness.

### **Spiritual qualifications**

The qualifications mentioned above all have to do with character, heartfelt enthusiasm for God, not wealth or financial expertise. The issue is not their technical ability, their independent wealth, nor any of the other things we sometimes look to in Christian organizations as prerequisites for giving someone financial responsibility.

I do want to mention in passing something about the fact that two of these servants are unnamed. The first of these men was well-known for his enthusiasm for the gospel. (Most scholars think, by the way, that this is Luke, who wrote the book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke. We don't know anything about the second individual.) There may be a subtle suggestion here that the Corinthians should have known of a man "praised by all the churches" in nearby Macedonia. The Corinthians were eager to associate with spokesmen who had worldly credentials and impressive style. Yet not far to the north were churches that had godly servants at

work in them and leaders who were unknown. Titus will have to introduce them when he comes. What Paul may be gently conveying is they really ought to know the names of these people.

I want to say two things, if I may, about the leadership of Peninsula Bible Church. I've attended this church for over 20 years and have been in almost all the positions one can be in—learner, intern, teacher, pastor, etc. I've had a lot of opportunities to look at the way financial decisions are made in this church. One thing I can say without reservation is that I have never seen a hint of dishonesty, using money for personal gain. There is a deep commitment to do what is right "in the eyes of the Lord," and to insure that any inspection by men will honor the Lord's name. It's one of the things I appreciate most about the men and women I have served with here. There is a strong concern that money should not be given prominence, and that individuals should not use authority to their own ends.

The other thing I would say, in keeping with Paul's example here, is that in most of the discussions about how money should be either raised or spent, the issues are spiritual: We want to discover what God is trying to do, what the Lord is saying to us, what's appropriate, and how we can reach non-Christians for him or serve those who are his own. Over and over again my experience has been that financial decisions turn on those kinds of questions.

So I urge you to have confidence in the honesty of the people who are in leadership in this church. Now, I can't promise you that they have no foibles. Those of us who are responsible for leadership here don't always make good decisions. However, the decisions we might wish had been made differently were not made badly because of dishonesty, but because of human inadequacy. I might note too the diversity of the church. We come from different strata of life and have different outlooks on things. One person will suggest that a certain expenditure seems entirely reasonable, a second will say it's horribly inadequate, and a third will see it as incredibly extravagant!

I enjoyed spending time with a group of men this last weekend. Milt Borg was regaling some of us with stories of the old days at PBC. I was encouraged to hear that people didn't always see eye to eye then either. Dependence on Christ to lead this church hasn't changed. Trying to find unanimity among a group of elders is the right process. There is a multiplicity of leadership; no one is in a position to use funds without being overseen by other people. My experience is that we're imperfect, but we have a deep commitment to honesty here. I hope that's encouraging to you. You ought to expect leadership to be honest in these things.

## **Honest revelations**

Another way that honesty is highlighted in this passage has to do with the reputation the Corinthians wanted to have among their fellow believers in Macedonia and other places. Chapter 9, verses 1 through 5:

There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we---not to say anything about you---would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

About a year previously, the Corinthians had heard about the opportunity to give to the poor in Jerusalem, and they had been effusive in their insistence that they would give a great deal of money; they wanted to be known as a generous church. So Paul took them at their word. They had not been required to say this or manipulated into offering a generous gift. In their characteristic way they had leaped at the challenge before them. So when Paul traveled to other places, he would speak of the generous response of the Corinthians, their commitment to sacrificial giving, and so on. Now word has come back to him that they are feeling embarrassed about all this, and that is one of the sources of tension between Paul and them. There isn't a big sum of money waiting in

Corinth. Their response had waned quickly after they had first spoken. What Paul is doing now is bringing the issues out into the open. He is saying in effect that their reputation will be based on what they actually do, not on what they say. He is not willing to cover their embarrassment by pretending the facts are not as they are.

You're probably aware of the widespread discussions of dysfunctional families, co-dependency, and systems of lies that are built to keep reputations from being sullied. Some adult member of a family is an alcoholic, for instance, and the family covers the tracks, pretending none of it is true. The term 'co-dependent' was coined to describe systems of lies developed by families that want to be thought well of. Paul, however, is not going to set up any reputation-protection systems for the Corinthians. Their reputation is going to be based on what they give, not on what they said or want people to think about them. If they want to be thought of as generous, it ought to be because they are generous, not because they once said they would be.

## **Cover-ups**

When I turned 16 I went to the Arizona Department of Motor Vehicles and got my drivers license. I was very proud of myself and tootled around Phoenix whenever I could talk my folks out of the car, as most 16-year-olds do. Six months later during the summer we moved from Arizona to California. Shortly after we moved I invited some friends of mine from Arizona to visit. Then I went down to the California Department of Motor Vehicles, took my driving test, and flunked it. In Arizona you didn't have to parallel park, but you had to know how to do that in California! I was very embarrassed by this, and I didn't want my friends from Arizona to know what happened to me. So my mother and I concocted a scheme so that somehow we could do all the things we wanted to do without anybody ever noticing that I wasn't driving, that I hadn't acquired my California drivers license. Eventually, the house of cards came down, and I had to admit that my reputation was undeserved. I was someone who couldn't parallel park, and I had to admit it.

Consider the savings and loan industry scandals that have taken place in this country. People have made claims of honesty and solvency, appearing to be wise and capable business officers, when they were none of those things. Investments have gone bad, and undeserved respect paid to those institutions have brought discredit on them and ruin, perhaps, on the nation. Their reputations were undeserved. No one insisted on honesty or made real qualifications important.

What Paul is doing is saying that in the church, at least, we're going to tell the truth. If the Corinthians don't do what they said they were going to do, they will not be loved less, but the truth will be known. He wants them to understand that there isn't going to be some sort of face-saving cover-up of the circumstances.

Whenever the subject of giving comes up, one of the questions that is always proper to ask is whether there is a commitment to honesty. Are the leaders to whom we are entrusting responsibility men and women who will do what they say? They should be honest, spiritually-minded. There should be checks and balances. There should not be the possibility of even appearing to be dishonest. Are all these things true? It's a proper question to ask, and the answer must be yes. Secondly, is there honesty in terms of reputation? Do we tell the truth about ourselves? Are we willing to live with reality instead of trying to hide things?

## **Generosity and freedom**

The second subject we're going to talk about this morning is generosity. Generosity here is tied to freedom. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." All kinds of things destroy freedom and the joy that goes with it in our experience. If you've ever been in a love relationship where one partner is deeply jealous, you realize how jealousy is a poison that destroys a relationship. The jealous partner places restriction after restriction on the other partner. The relationship becomes more and more burdened by often irrational expectations and the poison that goes with them. Jealousy destroys freedom. The same can be said of materialism, hoarding what is ours instead of enjoying the freedom to live life as God intended in the wide world he's created for us. If we have a mentality of holding tightly what is ours, running scared, giving only under pressure, we become smaller and smaller people, and God has less access to do good to us. Generosity is the soil in which freedom grows. That is Paul's point in verses 6 and 7:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows

generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

There are two things that make up the notion of generosity as I'm using it this morning. The first is that money should be given liberally. Paul uses an agricultural term, sowing. You sow generously, widely spreading the seed over the soil. In your giving you give a large amount (relative to what you have—recall the parable of the widow's copper coin). The second part of the idea has to do with the attitude with which you give. You not only give a large amount, but you give it joyfully. It's possible to give a large amount and hate doing it. That's not generosity. The generous and therefore free person is able to give in large amounts and give cheerfully.

The agricultural metaphor is helpful. If you're a farmer who has a bag of seed corn at the end of winter, when it's time for planting, you can act as if throwing the corn into the soil would do you no good, and feed yourself with it instead. But in the long run this is a very foolish choice, because of course by harvest time you have nothing. The one who has taken what he has and has sown it generously finds to his joy that in the long run he has made a wise choice, because the harvest is to his benefit. That's Paul's point here. He says, further, that our God loves a cheerful giver. What will follow is a description of how God will act lovingly toward a cheerful giver.

### **Generosity is the soil in which freedom grows**

But before we talk about what this means, I want to say what it doesn't mean. This is not a formula for getting rich. There are spokesmen who call themselves Christian, who claim the Bible says that if you will give your money to God (through them, of course), you will receive a direct financial benefit as a result. They claim a one-to-one correlation between riches given and riches gained. That is not what Paul is going to say here. What he does say is if you sow, you will reap a harvest of righteousness. He does promise that God will supply abundance to those who give, but the ideas of God's abundance, blessing, and harvest are very wide in their application. God will meet the needs of your heart: relationships, inner peace, joy, opportunity. He will benefit you in scores of ways, and money may or may not be prominent.

Verses 8 through 15:

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

"He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving 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!

### **Cheerful givers**

God loves a cheerful giver, and he gives to those who give cheerfully. His love expresses itself in action; it's the word *agape*. His love is not theoretical. He loves what those who are generous do, and he gives generously to them.

Verse 11 makes the point well. Our riches will be from God. The abundance of the harvest will be ours in every way-everything that matters to us, that's worth having-whether opportunities for hospitality, songs to sing in the middle of the night when we've been clapped in jail as Paul and others were in Philippi, friends we never had before, the opportunity to think clearly, or to give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name. There are all kinds of ways that riches can be given by God. God's gifts are for generosity, which produces more of God's gifts, which are for further generosity. It's our commitment to be generous that allows the One who loves our generosity to give to us in return.

I want to say a practical word at this point. I was asked by a number of people about the subject of tithing after last week's message. People wanted to know how to decide how much to give, what it was to be generous, how I myself make these decisions. So let me just tell you, for whatever it's worth, the pattern in our home.

The word tithing is an Old Testament term that means to give 10 percent. The requirement for the Jews was that they take the first 10 percent of the crops they harvested and give it to the service of God in the temple, to the priestly caste who were not allowed to own property and grow their own crops. There is no carryover into the New Testament requiring Christians to give 10 percent to the work of the Lord. The church is a spiritual unit. The Jews were a spiritual unit as well, but also a nation, an economic unit.

However, I do think 10 percent is good advice to start with. The responsibility of Christians is to be generous, to be responsive to what God has done. We in our family use 10 percent as a guide. We make commitments to give to the church and other ministries on a regular basis (monthly in our case) 10 per cent of our income. When our bills are paid, checks are also made out according to previously made decisions to give to the Lord's work. There have been times when we have been under financial strain, and we felt the freedom to give less. There are many times in the lives of Christian people when, because of their circumstances, they ought to give much more.

Then the other thing we try to do is remind ourselves to be generous; we haven't bought God off by writing monthly checks. If somebody is placed in my path who has a need I can meet, I should meet it. That's the point of view from which our family approaches life. We don't always do what is right, and there are times when I have to repent of things done or not done. However, there were enough requests for a pattern of making decisions that I decided it would be helpful to offer that to you.

The last thing that Paul highlights in verses 12 through 16 is that generous giving results in recipients' praying and caring for those who give. In addition to God's acting to benefit generous givers, those who are the recipients will appreciate and pray for those who have made gifts. That is good news as well.

### **God's indescribable gift**

Verse 15, the concluding verse, reads as if Paul were overcome by an awareness that drew from his lips, as he was dictating this letter, an exclamation of gratitude.

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

This is the foundation for everything he says. It is the foundation for a commitment to honesty in financial responsibility and in reputation. It undergirds any advice to be generous because God loves a cheerful giver. God has first given to us, and the gift is beyond describing. We've been given life itself in Christ when we didn't deserve it. Paul finds himself perhaps on his knees, and certainly moved in spirit: Thanks to God. His gift is indescribable.

I would have us end on that note as well. We've seen examples and heard urging in the words of scripture about our stewardship. Let's take a little time and think what it means to have received life from Christ. Think where you would be without him. Think what it cost God to give us this gift. Think about some benefit you've received. Then will you determine to tell someone about it? It's healthy to acknowledge these things, to be reminded of what we've been given.

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