

GIVING OUT OF JOY

SERIES: THE GRACE OF GIVING

By Doug Goins

Do you find giving to the Lord's work hilarious? Have you ever laughed out loud because you had the privilege of giving something away for Jesus' sake? If you are not experiencing the joy of giving then, like the Christians in Corinth, you too will be encouraged by God's wonderfully liberating words found in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. This is Paul's final appeal to the Corinthians to join with all the other Gentile churches around the Mediterranean basin to participate in a collection for the persecuted saints in Jerusalem.

We have been celebrating joy this morning; joy at the birth of Jesus. We have exhorted one another to be of good cheer because of Emmanuel, God with us. We have acknowledged him as "the day spring"—the One who cheers us up spiritually when our spirits are down cast. The angelic host brought good news of great joy because of the birth of the Savior.

And we have been celebrating this gift of God with the apostle Paul the past couple of weeks: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich...Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!" (2 Corinthians 8:9, 9:15).

This is the third and final message in these two chapters of 2 Corinthians (see Discovery Papers #4647 and #4748), focusing on the grace of giving. In this message we will consider giving out of *joy*. But first, to set the context, consider verse 7 of chapter 9 where Paul writes, "...for God loves a cheerful giver"—a joyful giver—one who is glad to give. In his paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson says it this way: "God loves it when the giver delights in the giving."

Unfortunately, the Corinthian church wasn't about cheerful giving. There were a lot of areas in their Christian life where they enjoyed freedom, but generosity was not one of them. The word "cheerful" in Greek is *hilarios* where we get our word "hilarity." Taken literally, God loves hilarious givers! "Hilarity" requires energy and enthusiasm, a degree of spontaneity, and that's really what Paul is calling for in terms of a response to God's gift.

Joyful giving is like planting crops

In verses 6-11, Paul begins with an illustration—an agricultural metaphor—to explain how we can learn to delight in our giving. He says that joyful giving is like planting crops. Every culture puts its wisdom into some sort of proverbial form. We, in our country, have inherited maxims like: "A stitch in time saves nine," or "Don't count your chickens before they hatch," or "Look before you leap." That's modern day proverbial wisdom. In this passage, Paul begins by using proverbial wisdom that was probably well known in his day, and that may even capture another of our contemporary maxims: "We get as good as we give."

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully. (2 Corinthians 9:6)

Paul uses that same form in Galatians 6:7 where he says that a man reaps what he sows. And though there may not be an exact scriptural quote for verse 6 in the Old Testament, we find much the same thing in a number of passages.

In Proverbs, for instance, we find: “It is possible to give away and become richer! It is also possible to hold on too tightly and lose everything” (Proverbs 11:24, *The Living Bible*). The closest New Testament parallel may appear in Luke 6:38 where Jesus says, “Give, and it will be given to you... For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.”

Imagine a Middle Eastern farmer in the time of the apostle Paul, who has a container of seed that he saved from the last year’s harvest. He might be tempted to take a very short-sighted, self-protective view of his resources. He might say out of fear, “I need all of this to feed my family right now. I don’t trust the natural order of things to bring about a harvest. If I throw it on the ground it might not germinate or grow into a new crop, so I’m going to keep it all for myself right now.” That sounds foolish and illogical, but what Paul is saying in verse 6 is that we are just as foolish not to trust that God will use our resources to meet the needs of others, and to further the work of the Kingdom.

The two adverbs in contrast in verse 6 are important: “sparingly” and “bountifully.” The word “sparingly” was in common usage in Greek culture outside of the Bible, and most often meant “to be miserly.” As a matter of fact, Eugene Peterson translates it in his paraphrase as “stingy.” So, “sparingly,” “miserly,” being “stingy,” or as Proverbs 11:24 says, “holding on too tightly,” captures the picture. The *contrast* is giving that is bountiful, generous, lavish, and abundant. Therefore, the principle described here is: We will harvest in proportion to our planting, or again to use our modern slang, “we get as good as we give.”

Guidelines for giving

Now, Paul adds some more guidelines for giving, basically in addition to what we have already looked at in chapter 8 in terms of specific principles for how we ought to give:

Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

Parenthetically, Paul’s approach to fund-raising really runs contrary to most of the approved methods in Christian fund raising today. Paul held no rallies, no fund raising banquets, he called for no pledges, he didn’t send out four-page letters filled with heart-rending pictures and underlined appeals meant to look like it was written by hand. There was no “buy a brick” campaign. He didn’t thread a red ribbon through a giant thermometer to creep upward toward a goal that he had set. There wasn’t even an “every member” canvas. In fact, he seems to have purposely avoided any and all strategies like that.

Rather he tells the Corinthians, first of all, that giving is an individual matter. Note that “each one” is to determine how much to give. It is a question that each individual or family has to figure out for themselves, and that can never be determined by how much other people are giving.

Next, he says, “as he has purposed,” which means to choose deliberately, to make up one’s mind about something. This is not responding impulsively to some emotional appeal. Paul’s challenge is that our giving be thoughtful.

Then, he tells them that giving is a private matter and the decision is to be made “in his heart.” It is not a public ceremony. It is disconcerting how many Christian fund-raising programs require some kind of public recognition or acclaim—endowed chairs, building projects, scholarship funds—that are rarely underwritten anonymously. As we have already observed, the real reason to give is because our hearts are moved to do so. William Barclay says, “The need awakens a desire that cannot be stilled.”(1) That’s how God gave. He loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for us.

Finally, Paul tells them that giving is joyfully voluntary. It's not to be done grudgingly or under compulsion. The joyful person gives generously, lavishly, abundantly. The miserly person gives grudgingly, sparingly, even resentfully in response to some form of public manipulation. Probably no character in Western literature captures the essence of grudging, compulsive, miserliness more vividly than Charles Dickens' character from *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge is synonymous with narrowness and rigidity and with hoarding of resources. Dickens, in his beautiful little story, is very clear on the spiritual issues at work in Scrooge before and after Christmas Eve. This is how he describes Ebenezer Scrooge:

Oh, but he was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone. Scrooge, a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner. Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire. Secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheeks, stiffened his gate, made his eyes red, his thin lips blue, and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and on his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him. He iced his office in the dog-days, and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas. (2)

That is a description of materialism—hoarding what is ours instead of enjoying the freedom to give generously. If we hold tightly to what is ours, running scared and giving only under pressure, then we become narrow, cold, and very small. We become Scrooge-like and God has less access to do good through us because he has less access to us.

But we don't have to live that way. We can learn to give cheerfully and bountifully for the right reasons. God can transform us and thaw us out and make us into gracious, generous people who reflect his character. Like Titus, and like those anonymous brothers we met last week, our lives of generosity can be a glory to Christ.

Giving with confident expectation

The verses that follow describe how God will act lovingly toward that kind of open-hearted generosity. We can give like the Macedonian Christians we met two weeks ago (Discovery Paper #4647). They were people who were confident of God's resources, resources that empower and enable us. Our giving can be with confident expectation of what God is going to do through us.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; as it is written,

“HE SCATTERED ABROAD,

HE GAVE TO THE POOR,

HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ABIDES FOREVER.” (2 Corinthians 9:8, 9)

Now notice how Eugene Peterson paraphrases these same verses in *The Message*:

God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,

“He throws caution to the winds,

giving to the needy in reckless abandon.

His right-living, right-giving ways

never run out, never wear out.”

There are immediate benefits from our giving. The promise is that we will share God's abundant grace, his resources. The “universals” in that verse are really staggering: “All grace,” “always,” “all sufficiency,” “every good

deed.” That doesn’t mean that God will make every generous Christian wealthy in terms of material things. But it does mean that if we are controlled by generosity there will always be something we can give away. And we can give ourselves away in a variety of creative ways—time or energy or money or skills.

There are many opportunities in which we can be generous with God’s resources within us. And God promises in verses 8 and 9 to make us adequate, whether he will provide the money to give away, or gifting us with time and aptitude to fulfill physical or relational needs. God, through his grace, will enrich us morally and spiritually so that we can grow in Christian character as we give.

Paul says it is not our sufficiency, but the sufficiency of God that we can depend on. The word “sufficiency” in verse 8 means “adequate resources from within.” Earlier in this letter Paul wrote, “And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are [sufficient] in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our [sufficiency] is from God” (2 Corinthians 3:4, 5). That dynamic is at work even in our giving.

We not only share God’s gracious resources, we also share his righteousness. Verse 9 is an excerpt from Psalm 112, which describes a righteous person who had nothing to be afraid of, who looked life in the face because his heart was pure before the Lord, and lived his life openly toward people and toward the needs of those around him. By using this word “righteousness” Paul isn’t suggesting that we somehow earn it by our giving because righteousness only comes through faith in Jesus Christ. But if our hearts are right, our grace giving will build our Christian character; “right-living, right-giving.”

Giving is spiritually enriching

Paul then returns to the agricultural metaphor of sowing and reaping. He reinforces the point that joyful giving will enrich us:

Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:10, 11)

Once again, the issue is God-dependency, not self-sufficiency. The generous giver, just like the farmer, is totally dependent on the Lord from start to finish. But notice that there will be reciprocity in giving. Paul is convinced that God will repay bountiful sowing on our part with the necessary resources to continue our lifestyle of generosity, our liberality. God’s enrichment may include financial resources, but his grace goes way beyond money. He will meet the deepest needs of our hearts. He will give us joy in the midst of sorrow. He will make us hospitable when there is opportunity for that kind of generosity. He will provide us the peace of Christ, peace that doesn’t make any sense from a human perspective, that we can share with people around us who struggle deeply. God administers all of this spiritual enrichment to us so we can offer these graces to other people.

The Lord Jesus said “freely you received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). He also said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). That is true of all of our resources—physical, material, emotional, financial, and relational. If we are sensitive to what is happening around us, we will realize that there are people who desperately need our generosity—the unloved, the overworked, the exhausted, the underprivileged, the lonely. He wants us to *give ourselves in our entirety* to people, to needs, and to opportunities.

Joyful giving brings glory to God

The last phrase in verse 11 tells us that when we give ourselves away for Jesus' sake, it will produce thanksgiving to God. That thought is summarized in verses 12-14: Joyful giving will bring glory to God. Our giving awakens a wonderful response of gratitude in the people to whom we give:

For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. (2 Corinthians 9:12)

In recent years, our church family has given on different occasions to serve the work of God in Pakistan among believers there. Several years ago we all helped rebuild a Christian village, Shantinigar, destroyed by Muslim fundamentalists. More recently we helped underwrite the cost of this year's national training conference for pastors and Christian workers in Pakistan.

Ed Woodhall and I recently had the privilege of representing PBC while visiting Pakistan. We heard verbal expressions of heartfelt gratitude to PBC. But they were really prayers of gratitude to God because he moved in your hearts and because you were willing to be a vessel through which his generosity could be expressed. I am grateful that we have had the privilege, and I pray for more opportunities, to help serve and minister to the persecuted church in Pakistan.

It's important for us to hear responses like that. Paul continues to affirm that giving benefits the *entire* body of Christ, not just individuals. But there is also a wonderful, expansive effect:

Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all, while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you. (2 Corinthians 9:13, 14)

Generous giving stimulates prayer and caring in the hearts of those who benefit. Their love will be deepened for those who give, then reciprocate by blessing the givers through intercessory prayer. Does it encourage you to know that many of your brothers and sisters in Christ in Pakistan pray for us regularly because of our giving that expresses the grace of God?

Paul tells us that people like that are motivated to love, motivated to pray for us by two things. First, that we have *proven* (the word means "you have proved") our open-hearted generosity—"your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ"—and what we have professed to believe about Jesus is demonstrated by how we live.

Secondly, "the liberality of your contribution to them and to all" shows that because of our faith we really do put our money where our mouth is. In very concrete ways, our joyful giving shows that we possess a saving faith that accepts the claims of the gospel and lives submissively to those claims. The apostle James wrote that this is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world (see James 1:27b). James is speaking of the corrosive influence of materialism in terms of worldly effect.

The issue of what we confess to be true about our faith being authenticated by how we live our lives was captured beautifully in the credal statement written by Bonnie Lee, one of our interns:

A creed is something one not only stands by, but lives by— to look to the future, to understand one's past.

Without knowing who or where or whether exists a God to turn to means a life of joys that don't last. God exists—He is the One and only true God.

He is God, known to us in Jesus, the Son of God, as He came to Earth, born as a man.

As a man, Jesus was completely human, filled with hunger, thirst and breath.

Locked in time, in a body made of flesh and blood, His soul was filled with all a man tries to forget and dreams of never knowing enough.

Sin was temptation that never touched His Spirit for He was Christ, perfect, holy and divine, and God's voice to those who accept to hear it.

His voice is one and the same as God's, the Father, maker of Heaven and Earth. That's because He was also Creator before the beginning of any birth.

Of one mind, in one Person, and of one heart, Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit all have an equal part.

Before there was time, distance, or light, all three existed, separate as individuals, but never apart.

Now Jesus has resurrected, His body completely raised up and gone. He is sitting at the right hand of God, the Father, to judge and to impart His Holy Spirit to all who will believe and to return back to Earth one day and rule with love, wisdom, and heart.

The good news of Christmas proclaims that our joy is everlasting and rock solid. The angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10). God's gift of his Son is foundational for everything Paul has said about open-hearted, grateful, thoughtful, joyful, generosity in these two chapters.

Joyful giving is an act of worship

Verse 15 closes this section with a worshipful expression of thanksgiving:

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

Our own giving is to be like the Lord's—his being the supreme example of giving, which is a generosity towards us that continues to this very moment. Paul wrote in Romans 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also freely give us all things." He still keeps giving us all things. We have been given life in the Son, and all of God's resources to live that life. We can learn to give cheerfully, bountifully, and to give for the right reasons. God can transform us into gracious, generous, joyful people who reflect His character.

To finish the story, do you recall how God supernaturally transforms Ebenezer Scrooge? There was the visitation of his dead partner, Jacob Marley, on Christmas Eve. Then, the three spirits of Christmas: past, present and future. They enabled Scrooge to see himself as he really was, someone who was dead in his trespasses and sins. But Scrooge came to his senses, and kneeling before the Lord, he repented of sin and God gave him a new life, a second chance.

In the book, Scrooge experiences an incredible change. He wakes up on Christmas morning and throws open the drapes and sees the bright sunshine. He now sees the world through different eyes. He even goes to church to worship with God's people! His relationship with his nephew, with whom he had been estranged for years, is restored. He is suddenly very generous with the Cratchett family, but anonymously so (they didn't know where that huge turkey came from!). He also gave to the poor of London, and helped in the treatment of Tiny Tim's illness so that Tim could be healed. Scrooge's heart had been warmed. He was joyful. He was hopeful. The people of London were shocked at his transformation.

This is how Dickens closes the story, reflecting on the change in Scrooge and the commitments that Scrooge made to live generously:

*Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. And to Tiny Tim who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or burrow, in the good Old World. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh and little heeded them, for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset, and knowing that such as these be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him.
...And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. (3)*

May that be said of all of us. May the eyes of our hearts be opened to the joy of giving ourselves and our resources away for the sake of others and the Kingdom of God so that we live lives that glorify Christ. Now that's the best way to celebrate Christmas!

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NOTES:

- (1) William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, © 1954, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. P. 261
- (2) Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, © 1954, Oxford University Press, London, England. P. 8.
- (3) Ibid. P. 76.

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