

The Generous Gift

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Date: 31 January 2016

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Hello. If you haven't met me, I'm Aaron. Nice to meet you. So we are in 2 Corinthians, in the middle of it, and we're in the middle of a couple of chapters that deal with the topic of money.

Now before we get to the nitty-gritty of the actual passage, I thought it might be helpful to say a few general things about money. Money, in and of itself, is not strictly good or evil.

But it's not neutral either. It's not just another object in our life that we have complete authority over, like a broom or a napkin or something.

Those are great, I know, terrible examples, but you know, just like a thing, right? Now money does seem to have some kind of spiritual power, and it operates kind of like a god in our world.

And we give, that's partially because we sort of give it these sacred qualities. Like we think it can make us happy. We think it can make us secure.

[1 : 0 6] We think it can give us all that we love. And it can get into our heart and whisper the suggestion that we can live without God. You could put it like this.

We save money, and we look to money to save us. I think that money is probably the single greatest idol in our society. This is not a new idea, and it's not a modern Western problem.

In the Bible, Jesus talks far more about money than he does sex. But here's the interesting thing. I say I think it's probably the single greatest idol in our society, but I would reckon that most of us don't think we have a problem with it.

It's probably a blind spot for us. I say that because I've had many conversations with people. People come to my office or talk to me out there or whatever, and people have told me many, many things.

Many things that have happened in their life, many shames, many sins, many kind of stuff. But I don't think I've ever had somebody come up to me and say, pray for me, I love money.

[2 : 1 7] Pray for me, I have a problem with greed. I don't think anyone's ever done that. But I think that's why I'm not going to be able to do that. Paul's great goal in these chapters is that the gospel would so grip our life that money would be dethroned in our hearts.

That's how the gospel works. When we really get the gospel, when we understand costly grace, what it does is it can restructure our motivations.

It can reorient our will. It can change the seat of our understanding and our identity. It can change the way we spend. It can change the way we save. It can change the way we think about giving.

It's why when Paul was trying to get the Corinthian church on board with this collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, we talked about this last week, he didn't strong arm them.

He didn't manipulate them. He didn't try and trick them into it. No, he pointed them to the cross. That was his strategy. Because he was trying to deepen their understanding of the gospel, knowing that that would bleed out into how they viewed their money.

[3 : 37] Now, to the text. So, we're in the second half of chapter 8. And this week, Paul, I think what he's doing here is he's pre-empting questions he knows that will be in the minds of the Corinthian church.

So, he's talking about we need to take up this offering for this really poor church in Jerusalem. And he knows these questions are probably going to come up in their minds. And most basically the questions are this. And from the Corinthian end, the questions are this.

One, Paul, is this whole thing just a scam? Are you trying to scam us? Are you trying to con us here? Question one, question two. If it's not a scam, how much are we supposed to give?

Now, that makes up basically the two parts of the sermon. But I'll try and make a bit more sophisticated sounding. So, let's name the two halves of the sermon.

The integrity of the heart and the integrity of the process. Right. Now, we're going to deal with the integrity of process first. So, the Corinthians were worried that they might be being swindled by Paul here.

[4 : 45] And it's why in verses 16 to 24, this is the second half of the passage, it feels like there's a lot of unnecessary detail. Here's why. Because as soon as Paul puts it out there, hey, we're taking up this offering, he knows he opens himself up to the accusation of, oh, he's just in it for the money.

He's just trying to line his own pockets. Because back in the days, there were these itinerant speakers that would travel around and do these great talks. And they would. They would con people.

And Paul didn't want people thinking that this was just some new version of some old scam. So, he put some distance between himself and the actual money itself.

So, he says to them, 16 to 24, that's why it's all about these three guys. He's not carrying, he's not picking the money up. He's not delivering it to Jerusalem. He's talking about the three guys that will deliver the money to Jerusalem.

And he's going like, oh, they're so great. Titus. You know Titus? He's great. He's a great guy. Well, he'll be there. He's going to pick up the money and he's going to deliver it to Jerusalem.

[5 : 53] And there's some other guy in verse 18. You know that guy that's the really famous preacher? That guy that he doesn't mention by name, but he's so famous. He doesn't have a name. Like, that guy there, he's going to be there.

And in verse 22, there's another guy that's really super trustworthy. He's going to be there as well and he's going to be delivering it. And they're all really great guys. And you see the word earnest describes them all.

It means they're not just keeners. No, they're honest people. So, Paul's not involved in the handling of the money at all. Why does he want to put this big distance between him and the actual delivery of the money?

It says in verse 20, 21. We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us. For we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight, but in the sight of man.

So, he wants to carry out the offering, the collection, in a way which is morally beautiful to the Lord and above reproach to people.

- [6 : 52] When I became a Christian at 17, my family's not Christians. A family member basically said to me, ah, the church, the church, they're just in it for the money.
- And unfortunately, there are enough examples of financial impropriety in church land for people to be rightfully cynical. The Corinthian church was probably quite cynical.
- Which is why Paul was so careful about this offering. This is a good time. We'll finish this little section. This is a good time to probably mention that St. John's is very careful about money and how it's dealt with and how it's spent.
- A couple of examples, if it's of interest to you. When we take up the offering in the evening service and in the morning, no one is ever alone with money by themselves.
- Always has to be at least two people. And the two people that are counting the money and signing the pages, they cannot be married. Because, you know. The other thing I'll tell you, if it's of interest to you.
- [7 : 59] The clergy have no idea how much people give as policy. So, I've never even looked at any of the numbers.
- There's no names beside numbers. There's like one person in the church that knows this. All the clergy, we don't know. We don't want to know. And it's a good policy because our hearts are slippery. And if I knew that you were thrown in huge wads of cash each week, I might be inclined to give you special treatment.
- Give you an extra long hug on Sunday nights. And that would be wrong. And that would be a bit creepy. Anyway, we have lots of protocols around this stuff.
- Because it's just being wise. It's just being wise. It's because of the place that money has in society.
- We can chat about more protocols afterwards if you're interested in them. So, Paul is concerned about the integrity of the process. But more, more, he's concerned about the integrity of heart.
- [9 : 07] Heart. H-A-A-T. Heart. And that's verses 9 to 15. So, here we go. 9 to 15. This is part two of the sermon here.
- In verse 10 and 11, you look at it. Just slide your eyes over there. You can see you get a sense of he's going like, he's going, come on, mate. Come on. You started well. You had the idea that to take up this offering.
- It's a great cause. And you slacked off. Let's push through, folks. Let's push through and finish the job. And then he preempts the other big question. And I think it's our big question when it comes to money and offerings at church.
- And the big question is this. How much do we give? How much is right? And he answers it in a couple of ways. First way he answers it. Verse 12. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what the person has, not according to what they don't have.
- How do you summarize that? Proportionate giving. Proportionate giving. He's saying it doesn't matter how big the check is. Give according to what you have.
- [10 : 16] That means the rich and the poor can give great gifts to God. Great gifts to God that honor God. I'll give you three examples.
- The classic New Testament example you know is the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12. If you don't know it, let me remind you of it. It's wonderful. So Jesus is preaching in the temple. And he finishes his preaching.
- He walks away. He grabs a seat. And he watches people give their offerings. And his attention is captured by this poor widow. So they're in the temple, this amazing, majestic building. And there's these 13 large, big sort of trumpet-shaped vessels.

And people would line up and they'd pop their money. And it would cascade down to the central chest, into the coffers, so to speak, there. And people would line up to do this, right? Verse 41 of Mark 12.

And he sat down, that's Jesus, opposite the treasury, and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And it would have been easy to tell when the big ones dropped because it would have made an impressive clanging noise.

[11 : 22] As it went down the little trumpet thing there. So this widow comes along, puts in two small copper coins, which would have sounded rather unimpressive. By contrast.

But it was a huge, huge sum of money for her. And she went unnoticed by everybody except Christ. Amazing, isn't it?

It's in the most impressive building in the country, which, between all these wealthy donors, the religious elite, the only thing Jesus said was worthy of our attention was this poor widow dropping in one cent to the offering pot.

And he calls his disciples over and he says, look, this is what I'm talking about. This is what I'm talking about. It's not how big the offering is. It's proportionate.

It's what's happening in your heart. The second example is the Macedonian church in the north that Paul talks about earlier in chapter 8. We talked about this last week. He doesn't talk about the Macedonian church as an example because they dropped tons of money in the offering.

[12 : 25] It would have been a small offering. They were a very poor church. But it demonstrated that their hearts had been changed because they gave sacrificially. Third example is a contemporary version of just this Macedonian church example.

So I was chatting with David Short this week, who's my boss, and he said he witnessed a real-life Macedonian church example about 10 years ago. So he's at a conference in 2005 in Pittsburgh.

That was the year of Hurricane Katrina that had hit in this area. And at the conference, Baroness Caroline Cox from England was one of the speakers.

She had just come from visiting a persecuted group of Christians in Myanmar called the Karan people. And she told the conference about their terrible, terrible suffering.

So the armies would periodically come into their villages and they just want to get rid of this minority Christian group. So they would burn all their buildings, destroy all their crops, and these villages would have to just escape with their lives into the mountains and live hand to mouth.

[13 : 32] They had no sort of money to speak of, really. So she's visiting these people. And they had heard about Hurricane Katrina. And they knew that the Baroness was coming to a conference near where the hurricane hit.

And she told the conference how they had emptied their pockets of what money they had. And the currency is called a chat. So there's Burmese chats.

And they gave it to her. And she declined. And they insisted that they take this money. And David said that at the conference, she held out her hand with the offering. And it would have amounted to about \$2 US.

But in heaven, what a great treasure that was. What a great treasure that was. And what an amazing work of grace in the hearts of these Karan people. Paul says, give from what you have, not what you don't have.

We have high schoolers in this congregation scattered around in various places. I'm not trying to embarrass you wherever you are. But if you are part of the church, if you're a Christian, you should be giving to the work of the church.

[14 : 44] To the work of God. And here's the thing. And I mean this completely sincerely. I don't care how much you give. Honestly, I do not care how much you give. You could give 50 cents a month. But if that is according to what you have.

And that is sacrificial giving. And that is proportionate. God will treasure that. And he will use that for his kingdom purposes. And it demonstrates that God has changed your heart.

That he has done something in your heart. And this is not an idol for you. So what are we talking about? Where are we in the sermon here? Paul is preempting the question to the Corinthian church.

They're sort of going, well how much? What's the bare minimum here we can get away with maybe is kind of their angle. What are we supposed to give? And Paul says give generously, give sacrificially, give proportionally.

It doesn't matter how much. What matters is that the work of grace in your heart is overflowing in generosity. Now verses 13 and 14 here. Let me read them to you.

[15 : 46] For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened. But that is, it's a matter of fairness. Your abundance at the present time should supply their need. So that their abundance may supply your need.

That's fair. I think what's going on here is the second question that might come up for them. The Corinthian church. And they are possibly saying, well so you want everyone to have the same amount of money?

You just want it all to be kind of like, kind of slightly poor? Is that what you want here? I think it's possible to misunderstand what the Macedonian church, their example. And it's really possible to misunderstand the rich rang ruler in Jesus' teaching.

I don't believe we're called to give away all our money. Paul is simply saying, let's create a fair situation. In the Greek, the fairness word means equality.

He's saying, it's not fair that the Christians in Jerusalem can't meet their basic human needs. And you guys are living quite abundantly. That's not a just situation. It should be addressed.

[16 : 49] Now from there we could go off and talk about a million things. But we have to finish. So we'll move on. Right then, let's finish up. This passage is sprinkled liberally with lots of attitudinal words.

Words like this. And they mention a number of times. Desire, readiness, earnest, love. That's because Paul's greatest interest is your heart.

And not the size of the offering each week. Paul's interest is in how we relate to money.

Because how we relate to money exposes what's going on in here. And for many of us, or maybe most of us, there is an idol in here. We trust money more than we should.

And it's an idol that needs to be dethroned. Let me finish with a quote, sort of an extended quote from a guy called Jacques Ellul.

[17 : 54] E-L-L-U-L. That is exactly how you pronounce his name. I'm very educated. So he's got this book called Money and Power.

Jacques Ellul. He's a French, sort of, he's not a professor. He's an amateur theologian. French philosopher. He's dead now. He talks about dethroning money. And I'll finish with this.

He actually talks about profaning money. Wonderful. Isn't that a great way of saying it? He talks about profaning money. So let me read this quote, because I think it summarizes what we've been talking about here.

Let me read it here. To profane money is to take away its sacred character. It is to bring money back to its simple role as a material instrument. When money is no more than an object, when it's lost its seductiveness, its supreme value, its superhuman splendor, then we can use it like any other of our belongings, like any machine.

Of course, we must be vigilant and attentive because the power is never totally eliminated. Now, this profanation is, first of all, the result of a spiritual battle.

[18 : 59] But this must be translated into behavior. And here's the great sentence here. There is one act par excellence which profanes money by going directly against the law of money.

An act for which money was not made. The act of giving. It is, as a matter of fact, the penetration of grace into the world of competition and selling.

Isn't that great? I'm going to finish here. We have one more sermon on money next week. But if you do have questions about it, I'd love to chat to you afterwards.

Amen.