

The Generous Gift

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[0 : 00] Well, please open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 8 on page 968. We are in the middle of three sermons on Christian financial giving, and we're doing that because that's what the Apostle is doing in 2 Corinthians, and that's why you all came this morning to get this middle sermon.

This is a very important thing for us to talk about. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus takes time to go to the treasury, the glorified offering bucket in front of the temple, and he sits down and takes his disciples to sit down, and he watches how people are giving.

And simply put, every time we handle money, Jesus is observing us. But at the end of that little story, Jesus speaks, he says one thing, and it's a word of admiration.

It's a word of approval that Jesus gives. As he watches, we're told some people come along with a lot of noise and fanfare, and they've got very large gifts that they clink-a-ling-a-ling-a into the bucket.

And then, well, Jesus basically ignores them because they're making a great noise. But there's a poor widow who comes, and she's two little coins, which is all she has that week or month.

[1 : 36] It's all she has, and she puts it into the bucket, and it impresses Jesus deeply. And he says, the noise givers, they only gave the leftovers.

It didn't hurt them at all. They gave surplus money, but she gave her very life into that. And the idea is not that God hates large financial gifts, but that he has a completely different way of looking at money and the giving of money than we do, almost as though we could get our east and west completely confused, which Dan did this morning, and sent a shiver down the spines of all realtors in Vancouver.

Well, last week we looked at chapter 8, and we saw that money's complicated. Not good or evil, but it's not neutral.

That the Bible teaches and approaches money from a spiritual point of view. And it says money is like a power, a spiritual power. Because the problem is not simply an economic or a moral issue. The problem is the reality of our human hearts. Money is not neutral because our human hearts are not neutral. And that's why all the big economic isms, Marxism, socialism, capitalism, will never in the end bring about what we really hope they will, is because it takes a mighty miracle of God's grace to change our hearts.

[3 : 13] And without that grace and glory of Jesus Christ, we become touchy and prickly, even talking about money. Some of you may be feeling that already. But chapter 8 and 9 is drenched in grace, begins and ends with the grace of God.

And the verse that Jesus, oh, Jesus. I pointed at Dan and said, Jesus. You know that verse 9, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, became poor.

That undergirds it all. And I don't know if we've emphasized how wonderful that is. Because you see, none of us gives with purely perfect motives.

I mean, we long for Jesus' approval. We long for his commendation as the widow received. But we're also aware that in our hearts we have this deep lust for money and our joylessness in giving. You see, it's only by grace that our gifts please God. It's only by grace that anything we do pleases God. The desire to give comes from the Holy Spirit who is within us.

[4 : 22] And it's only as we allow the Spirit to penetrate this area of our love for money by God's grace that we are free to give away in a way that pleases him.

And last week we looked at the how of giving. And I gave six ways in which the grace of God is experienced and worked out in our giving. Can you name all six of them?

No, I couldn't either. And I wrote the sermon. And last week I called them principles. But I don't think that's a helpful word.

They're not rules. You know, if we give rules about this then you either feel very self-righteous or very guilty. But principles is far too vague an idea.

I think I want to talk about them as touchstones. Do you know what a touchstone is? It's a little rock with some silica in it. And you use it and rub it on other rocks.

[5 : 22] And if the other rock has gold or silver in it, it shows where the gold and silver is and it shows how pure it is. So those six things last week are like touchstones which show the gold of God's grace at work in our lives.

Let me mention one of them which we didn't spend much time on. And that is Christian giving should be planned giving. When the apostle began the conversation about money back in 1 Corinthians 16, he says this, On the first day of the week, the Sunday, each of you should put aside something and store it up as they prosper so there's no big pressure collection when I come.

And next week we'll see how the apostle says we are to do this in chapter 9. Now today we use the term planned giving for giving in your will after you die, which is a very good thing for all of us as Christians to do.

Sometimes Christian giving is spontaneous. You know what it's like? You just respond to a need. But for our ongoing partition in the life of a local congregation and for our ongoing growth in joy and discipleship, the first touchstone of Christian giving is planning.

We have to plan ahead how we will give, like you plan with your finances around other things. Do you have a plan? And the five other touchstones, you know, joy and sacrifice, they're all ways of seeing how the grace of God is working through it.

[6 : 53] And again I say because all of our giving is somewhat impure, we need touchstones to help us see how the grace of God would work and how we should please the Heavenly Father.

And today's passage has three more touchstones. And if you were here last week, we talked about the how and why of Christian giving. And I said last week that this week we'd look at how much. Do you remember that? Does anyone remember that? Does anyone but me remember that? We're going to look about how much.

That's why we're all very happy to be here. At the nine o'clock there's a lot of silences in the sermon, but it's not going to happen. How much should we give? What pleases the Lord? You're glad you're here now? Good.

Now the immediate problem for us is that Paul doesn't tell us. Well, he doesn't give us a number. He doesn't give us a percentage in these chapters, which is a major disappointment to every church treasurer all around the world.

[7 : 54] But many Christians, very wise Christians throughout the centuries, have looked to principles in the Old Testament to guide their giving.

I want to mention these two and make a few comments on them for our helpfulness. The first is the issue of tithing. In the Old Testament, you remember the patriarchs gave a tenth of what they had and then God commanded his people Israel.

They should give a tenth of all they have, of all they receive as a tithe to the Lord. But you know, of course, that wasn't the end of it. The tenth wasn't all that they had to give.

There were certain sacrifices that God commanded they had to pay for. They had to go to festivals and pay for that. There were freewill offerings and there was the upkeep of the Levites. So even in the Old Testament, the 10% was not a maximum by any stretch of the imagination.

And many, perhaps most mature Christians throughout the church centuries, have felt that giving 10% of one's income to the local church is a helpful thing.

[9 : 01] Not as a rent. You don't pay 10% and say the rest is for me, me, me, me to do with what I want. And then on top of that, Christians have felt and thought that they should give generously on top of that to other things.

Now, if you're new to Christianity and if you are new to Christ Jesus and God has begun to put in your heart a desire to give, you may not be able to afford a tenth.

You might have dependents and you might have all sorts of financial commitments. Or you may be able to give much more than 10%. But as I pointed out last week, the New Testament doesn't command a tithe, nor does it say anything against a tithe.

And I think the word of wisdom comes to us from Dr. Packer, who says this. He uses the picture of a crutch for the tithe. I think it's a helpful picture. It may be a good idea, he says, to practice tithing as a crutch until we get used to giving larger sums than we gave before.

But then we should look forward to receiving, sorry, of leaving the crutch behind because now we will have formed the Christian habit of giving more than 10%. That's in his book on 2 Corinthians.

[10:15] But there's another principle in the Old Testament that is a guiding principle and that is the principle of first fruits. It comes out of Deuteronomy 26. Israel was mostly, most Israelites were farmers on the land.

And the thing about a farmer is that you do not know at the beginning of the year how much total you're going to be able to give until the end of the harvest. There's quite a number of you who are in that circumstance.

If you're an artist, for example, you don't know what you're going to get this year. Or maybe you have started your own business. You may not exist at the end of the year. But God commands all Israelites, remembering this as farmers, not to just give at the end of the year.

Not to just give at the end of the harvest, but to give the first fruits. In other words, the first day you go out and you harvest whatever you get from your harvest, you give that not even knowing what the final harvest will be.

And the instructions in Deuteronomy 26 are fabulous. You should read them. You take it and you put it before the priest in a basket and you stand up and you give testimony. You say, God has blessed me.

[11:30] God gave me this land. God gave the sun and the rain. Everything comes from him. I am a very, very fortunate person. So giving of first fruit means you give before you know your total income as a sign of God's blessing.

Now, I've been a minister at St. John's, goodness gracious, 24 years. And the pattern of our giving at St. John's is a hockey stick.

That's the shape of our giving throughout the year. So that in the last month, there is this big uptick. We give about 20% of our annual income always comes in December. And it has a number of effects.

It means that during the summer, we have to use our line of credit, pay those charges to the bank to stay afloat. It also means during the fall, it's very hard to make concrete plans for a budget for the next year.

It also means that the trustees learn very wonderful lessons in prayerfulness and trusting God. I tell you, every year it's fabulous. We've become very prayerful in the last quarter.

[12:43] But it does open the door for resentment between people of different incomes. And it also means that we're appealing for money at Christmastime when there are lots of guests present.

We probably shouldn't be doing that. Yet the Lord's been very kind to us year by year by year, hasn't he? I mean, last year we had the largest amount to raise. And at the end of the year, there was a small surplus.

So, So I don't think our problem is with generosity. And I don't think our problem is with spending either. We're very careful about that. Our problem is with the timing of our giving.

And to be honest with you, I'm not even sure it's a problem. It may be the way that the Lord has of keeping us close to him. However, if you're someone who waits till the end of the year, and you only give what you can afford to give, I don't think that's pleasing to God.

This principle of giving the first fruits means you don't give what's left over. You don't give the surplus. You don't give something that's not going to cost you anything.

[13:54] Giving the first fruits means giving the best, giving the first, and trusting that God will provide. Okay, you say, that's all very good stuff.

But how much? How much? Well, as we look at chapter 8, there is a kind of answer to this question. And this brings me to three more touchstones. So let's have a look at these three touchstones.

I'm going to spend most of my time on the middle one. So how should we give as brothers and sisters? What does grace look like? Well, the first touchstone is heart giving.

As Dan pointed out and stole my thunder for the sermon during with the children, the passage begins in verse 8 and ends in verse 24, referring to the Corinthians' genuine love.

They committed to doing this a year ago, and a lot has happened in a year, but Paul does not bring out the big stick. He doesn't accuse them of backing out, but he takes them back to try and rekindle

their original desire, their heart desire.

[14:56] Look at verse 11, please. You see how verse 10 finishes that they desired to do it a year ago? Verse 11, now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.

So before he gets to any amount, he speaks about heart motivation. Because the fact is that you can make massive donations and your heart be a million miles from God.

Isn't that right? So Paul uses this language, and there are these words through the passage, readiness and eagerness and earnestness and desire. They're heart words.

They're touchstone words. They're not words we use so much these days with giving, but it's a wholehearted focus on another person, and it's a quickness of desire to do something.

Because the priority in giving that pleases Jesus is what happens with your heart. I mean, you can give as an act of self-worship. You know, you can give and make a big noise about it, as the people did before Jesus in that day, hoping that other people will think highly of you.

[16:06] You can give out of guilt. You can give out of embarrassment. It's not the best way that you can give grumpily. You can give miserly.

You can give a lot of money because you want to exercise control. It can be an act of hating God. Because as Jesus says, where your treasure is, that's where your heart is going.

That's where your heart is. So our attitude to giving tests our attitude to money. Giving is really a test of whether we love God or whether we love money.

I discovered that in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for money, *kesev*, comes from the verb to desire, to languish after something. It's a reminder that in our hearts, we all lust for, it's a natural thing, we lust for money.

And to give money away is completely unnatural. It's a sign that you've got something else in your life more important, like the love of God, the trust of God. You've learned, I don't live by bread alone.

[17:13] We've learned to pray, give us this day our daily bread. It's only grace that can do that. And where does that grace come from? If you look down at verse 16, it comes directly from God.

Paul's speaking at Titus. He says, Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus, the same earnest care I have for you. Put it in his heart. So the desire to give away, and the desire to love, the desire to give, it comes directly from God.

We don't generate it. Appeals don't generate it. It comes from the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It's a spiritual touchstone. Our heart readiness, our willingness, and our eagerness.

It doesn't just come from the fact that God owns everything, and I'm giving him back what's his anyway. I think this heart touchstone comes from God's extraordinary grace.

That he's loved us, and he's given, and given, and given, and continues to give to us, and he's completely trustworthy in his giving. And I think that creates a desire to give to him. So the first touchstone today is heart giving.

[18:18] Okay, you say, but how much? The second, the second touchstone, there's the answer, and that is, we give proportionally.

Proportionally. Verse 11. Right at the end of the verse, the apostle says, complete that collection out of what you have.

For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what a person does not have. It's very helpful.

At the front end of the chapter, you remember last week, the apostle gives two illustrations. I think it's possible to misunderstand those illustrations. The Macedonians who gave way beyond their ability, and Jesus Christ who gave his life over to death.

And it's possible to read Paul as though he's saying, you should impoverish yourselves and give everything. And sometimes God does call people to give everything. But here in the normal course of things, he says, give out of what you have, according to what a person has, not according to what you don't have.

[19:31] And that simply means that God completely understands our financial circumstances and all our commitments. And he does not expect you to give what you don't have, but to give in proportion to what you do have.

So verse 12, when he says it's acceptable, it doesn't mean acceptable to Paul. It means the word is literally, it's very pleasing to God, which is great.

You know, that if we give in proportion, if we give with our hearts, that Jesus watches and he's pleased. It has all sorts of implications.

And it means that every single one of us can give. You don't need to wait until you get more money to be able to give. You might be a high schooler.

You might be on an allowance. You may have some debt. You need to pay down the debt, but you also need to give at the same time. Because both of us, all of us need to learn to live dependently on God.

[20 : 36] It also means that the greater your wealth, the greater the responsibility you have and the greater, I think, the proportion that you can give. You know, as our income or our investments grow, so should the proportion of giving.

If you're wealthy and you give, it is to please God. It's not for our sake. You acquire no virtue or merit by doing it.

You do it to please him. And you're only doing what is expected of all of us. And we are all unworthy servants. And the apostle pushes that a little bit further.

And he uses this concept in verses 13 and 14 of equality. If you look it down at verse 13, he says at the end of the verse, it's a matter of fairness.

The word fairness is literally equality. And then again at the end of verse 14, that there may be equality. Now, what on earth does Paul mean by that?

[21 : 42] I mean, I've got these very learned books on my desk and just about all of them disagree with each other. Does it mean that Paul, Paul is saying that Corinthians should impoverish themselves so that the Jerusalem Christians should be rich?

I don't think he can say that. I don't think he's saying that. Because if he would say that, he has to then get the Corinthians to pay for the poor Macedonians. And then when the Corinthians in poverty, the Macedonians would have to pay back.

And I don't think, I don't think that's what he's trying to do. It doesn't mean that the top 5% of earners should pay for and help the lower 50% of earners.

I don't think that's it either. I'm very grateful. What Paul does in verse 15 is he takes us back to a moment in the Old Testament to a great equalizing miracle and shows us where he gets this idea from.

It's Exodus 16, the day God gave manna from heaven. You see verse 16, as it is written, whoever gathered much had nothing left over and whoever gathered little had no lack.

[22 : 45] This is a wonderful story. You should have a look at this in Exodus 16. It begins like so many other stories in the Bible with the people of God complaining and complaining and complaining.

And they take on Moses. It's two months after God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. And they say, the food out here stinks, they say. They say, you've brought us out into the desert to kill us. Take us back. Take us back to Egypt because they had falafels there. And we would like to eat better than we're eating now. And God is very kind. He says, okay, what I am going to do every day is I will rain down bread from heaven when you get up in the morning and each person has to go and collect one portion.

And I'm doing this to test you on a daily basis to see whether you'll trust me and obey me. And he says, you collect, some will need to collect more and some will need to collect less depending on their needs.

And he says, you cannot stockpile or hoard your manna. If you do, it will become rancid with worms and it will stink. Except on the day before the Sabbath because then I'll make it last for two days.

[24 : 01] Incidentally, I was reminded reading this chapter that it tasted like wafers with honey. The emphasis, of course, is the idea that every morning, every morning, we gather enough for today.

We gather the daily bread. If you have a family of 12, you'd get plenty. If you were a family of two, there was none left over. Eat it today, Jesus said, so that you'll know I am the Lord.

Now what's that a picture of? I think it's a picture of grace. It's not a picture of money. It's how God connects to our receiving and our giving and our supplying because we need the grace of God if we're going to give.

And here's the thing. God does not give us enough grace for tomorrow, today. He only gives us enough grace for today.

Exactly what we need. And then tomorrow for tomorrow. And He does that so that we will know that He is the Lord. And He sends His grace into our hearts like manna as a gift from heaven to satisfy our deepest needs.

[25 : 15] And you know, some days we need more and some days we perhaps don't need quite as much. But it is out of this supply of grace that we give not just financially but we share ourselves and we share our wealth.

And just like the grace that God supplies, you and I, we have to gather it up and then we have to use it. And I think this is the equality that the Apostle is talking about.

It's not a certain amount of money. It's the answer to the question how is God going to change my grubby heart so that I will become a generous giver? How can I give proportionately?

Well the answer is simply He's pouring His grace into your life now and He will through the rest of the day. You have to trust Him enough for today. We all have to.

This is our true equality. We all come to depend on Him and we all learn how to become givers not just financially but as the children said in all sorts of other ways.

[26 : 15] And when we do that God's grace flows through us to other people because we have gathered our manna. So that's the second touchstone proportionally. And the third for just a moment the third touchstone is that there needs to be integrity integrity in giving.

It's amazing. Paul spends the last paragraph of chapter 8 saying that the collection is going to be completely above board. He introduces the three people who are going to collect the money.

He speaks about their qualifications. He puts a distance between himself and actually handling the money. But why is he doing this? It's not because he's got a utilitarian view suddenly.

He wants to put money in its rightful place. He wants to undermine its grip and say we're actually going to use this for the glory of God. So these two unnamed brothers who are commissioned by the churches in Macedonia their qualifications are primarily spiritual qualifications.

So they'll not only do what's right but they'll do what's seen to be right as well. And every Christian organisation needs integrity in its handling of money. Because the grace of God doesn't stop after the collection.

[27 : 29] It doesn't stop when the plate gets to there or out there or in the bank. It continues. It flows and blesses provided it's handled with integrity and care. And many of you here know much better than I do that we have all sorts of protocols and standards in place for collecting and counting and handling your giving because we want to do what is right and to be seen to do what is right.

And the reason we're doing that comes from here. It's not just so that we'll be compliant for the auditors even though that's important but for the glory of God. See verse 19 the act of grace is ministered by us for the glory of the Lord himself.

And to show our goodwill. So as we give the Lord Jesus like that day at the temple he observes but he doesn't look at our giving from a utilitarian point of view.

It was the smallest gift that impressed him the most you remember and it impressed him because it was given purely and simply and out of generosity and based on grace.

Soon before he was crucified do you remember Mary anointed Jesus' feet with oil with very expensive ointment and one of the disciples utterly scandalised at the waste of money was Judas.

[28 : 51] He was upset that Mary what Mary was doing it didn't conform to the laws of cost analysis you know she was wasting money on Jesus she was doing the opposite of what was useful with money.

Well it's only grace isn't it that helps us put money in its place. Grace teaches us to give it's in giving that we through the grace of God begin to destroy the grip of money and power over us but without Christ giving makes no sense whatsoever.

It is a scandal to the exaltation of the money unit as he talked about last it's a scandal to the worship of money which we which we live in in our culture and it breaks the cycle of merchandising and selling and when we give it pleases Jesus as a sweet smelling sacrifice and next week we'll look at this Paul says God is able to make all grace abound to you so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times you may abound in all good works let's kneel for prayer then we finally have open humility and and follow hymn in all■■■■ and your hook and faith how to ■■ and entend pour eachagogue and hust and