

Giving Until it Brings Joy

II Corinthians 8:1-9, 9:6-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 8, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; ²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— ⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. ⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (II Corinthians 8:1-9, NRSV)

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” (II Corinthians 9:6-9, NRSV)

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Earlier this week, in his response to the senseless massacre in Las Vegas, late night host Jimmy Kimmel confessed to his audience, “It feels like someone has opened a window into hell.” His words I’m sure took into account other hellish scenes we have watched play out around the world in recent days, in Puerto Rico and elsewhere in the Caribbean, in Mexico City, even in the southern states of our own nation. It’s easy to be overwhelmed by the despair. Those of us who are

followers of Jesus find ourselves, more and more these days, pleading to heaven for him to come back and set things right. Come, Lord Jesus, come.¹

When communities are devastated we instinctively turn our thoughts and prayers to those most affected. It’s also natural that out of love for our neighbors we look for material ways we can help as well. Lines to donate blood in Las Vegas this week stretched up to six hours long as hundreds, if not thousands, of people came to give. Nations around our region sent their best search and rescue teams to Mexico City recently to help with recovery efforts there. And when some believed that aid to Puerto Rico wasn’t coming quickly enough, they criticized those they believed are in positions to have done more.

Our passage from II Corinthians this morning comes out of a similar context. In the middle of the first century, the church in Jerusalem found itself in crisis. Overpopulation and drought led to famine across the region. Jewish and Roman taxation had financially crippled the people. And on top of it all, these Jewish Christians had been socially and economically ostracized by their fellow Jews. This combination of natural disaster, oppression, and persecution left this community in dire straits.

All this led the Apostle Paul to go on a fund-raising crusade on behalf of this church which he loved. In this section of his letter to the church in Corinth we hear one of the many appeals he made to the larger church to come to the aid of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. To inspire the Corinthian church he begins by lifting up the example of the Macedonian church and the generous gifts they have already given towards this cause. His words here, which I want us to walk through this morning, are powerfully relevant, not only as they teach us about coming to the aid of those in need, but also as they teach us about giving in general. Keep your Bibles open with me as we walk through this passage verse by verse.

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¹ The very prayer offered at the end of the Bible in Revelation 22:20.

poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Notice that the Macedonian Christians, whom Paul holds up as a brilliant example of generosity, are not people of great means. In fact, they are *extremely poor* themselves. And this is typical, by the way. In the wake of the Great Recession a few years ago, when the need among people in our country was as great as it had been in some time, studies showed that higher-income Americans gave proportionally far less to charity than their lower-income counterparts. For example, when the recession hit those making over \$200,000 a year gave, on average, 5% less than they had given before the recession. At the same time, those making \$100,000 a year or less gave 5% more, while those making \$25,000 a year or less responded to the need around them by increasing their giving by 17%!² These statistics bear out even in the church where study after study has shown that those with less generally give away a greater percentage of what they have than those with more.

How can this be? The answer is right here in Paul's words. Paul wants the Corinthians to know about "the grace of God that has been granted" to those in Macedonia who have next to nothing but still give so much away. You see, when you have almost nothing you are under no illusion that material wealth is your security because it has not been your security. Instead, you are forced to turn to God to literally provide for your daily bread. But then, when God faithfully does provide, you begin to see that God, who is richly abundant, is in fact your ultimate security, and that leads you to hold much more loosely to even what little you do have knowing that your Heavenly Father is a God of abundance who will provide what is needed. When you are rich, however, it is so very easy to be deceived into believing that your wealth is the source of your security, and when that happens you become much, much more unwilling to part with it. How very difficult it is, Jesus once said, for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.³ This is why stewardship, the ways that we handle the material resources God has placed into our hands, is far less about money than it is about faith. Said another way, stewardship is not our way of raising money, but rather God's way of raising us into the likeness of His Son.

² "Wealthy Americans Are Giving Less Of Their Incomes To Charity, While Poor Are Donating", by Katia Savchuk, October 6, 2014, find the article at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katiasavchuk/2014/10/06/wealthy-americans-are-giving-less-of-their-incomes-to-charity-while-poor-are-donating-more/#6e011dee1264>

³ Matthew 19:23

³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—

Whenever we talk about giving, whether giving spontaneously towards tragedies like we've seen recently or giving regularly to God's work in the church, there is always this question: How much should we give? Paul's words here give an incredibly wise answer to that question. Again, the saints in Macedonia gave "according to their means" but also "even beyond their means." In other words, they didn't all give the same because they didn't all have the same to give. Now, the scriptures do clearly teach that we are called to try to start with a tithe in our giving, to begin by giving away at least 10% of what God has given to us. Beyond that, however, you aren't called to necessarily give more or less than I give and the moment I suggest that you are is the moment I've turned what ought to be a joyful response to God's grace into the competitiveness of guilt-ridden religion. We each are called to give according to our individual means to do so. It's why the very small gift of a very poor person can actually be much more generous than the very large gift of a very wealthy person.⁴

With that in mind, what we ought to all share in common in our giving is sacrifice. As Paul suggests, we all should try to give "beyond our means". Why? Because again, giving isn't about money, but about faith. So if I only give what I really don't need in the first place, I'm missing an opportunity to place myself in a position where I will need to trust God to provide. The best way to get over a fear of flying is to keep getting on airplanes where you are forced to trust the plane. The best way to get over a fear of scarcity is to keep on giving sacrificially, beyond your means, so that as you keep putting yourself in a place of financial dependence on God you'll have the opportunity to witness first hand how God will act to provide. Then, when God is faithful, your faith increases.

C.S. Lewis puts it brilliantly when he writes,

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., are up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving too little away. If our charities do not at all

⁴ See Jesus' words about the very poor but very generous widow in Luke 21:1-4

pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small.⁵

Notice how natural this giving from a place of faith is in the Macedonian church. Paul continues: **“and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”**

These people gave so freely because they had been set free to do so as they gave themselves to the Lord and discovered, by stepping out in faith, that the Lord is faithful.

From the time our children were very young we always talked to them about making a financial pledge every fall to the work of the church that coming year. In those early days, of course, our kids had very little money coming in, maybe a dollar or two in allowance every week. And so I’d lay out ten dimes on the table and explain that this is how much money they received every week and then explained that God wanted us to begin by giving one of those dimes, a tithe, back to the church, but that we also might decide to give more after that. Well, when I then asked them what they wanted to give they inevitably would declare that they wanted to give at least five or six dimes back to God every week, at least half of their meager income. And I’m ashamed to say that my instinct was often to discourage them for giving away that much, maybe because their generosity always made me ashamed of my lack thereof.

How could I miss that fact that right before me was a beautiful example of what faithful dependence looks like? My kids knew that Esther and I provided for them everything they really needed, and so they were set free to share from the excess which had been placed in their hands. Oh, that we would become like little children and excel in our faith as we are set free in the knowledge that our Heavenly Father has promised repeatedly to provide for us everything we need, our daily bread.

“I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for

your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Here Paul gets to the motivation of our giving, reminding us that people give for a variety of reasons. Commentator William Barclay says there are four.⁶ These reasons, by the way, not only apply to our giving of material resources, but also our giving of time, abilities, effort, whatever.

First, some people give out of duty. Think of how most of us pay our taxes. We’re not thrilled about it but we believe that it’s our duty as citizens. Some of us give to God for the same reason, simply because it’s our duty.

Second, some people give for self-satisfaction. Now, this is, of course, a natural result of giving; when you give it often feels good to give. The problem is that while self-satisfaction is a good and natural *result* of giving it makes a lousy *motivation* for giving because if you’re giving simply because you know that act of doing so will make you feel better, then who have you really given the gift to? Yourself.

Third, some people give for prestige. These gifts are given to glorify the giver, or to put the receiver in debt. These gifts are never given anonymously because that would defeat the point. I’m giving so that others will see my gift and think better of me for giving it. Some people even give to God as a way of trying to get God to think better of them.

Paul here gives us the last and truest motivation for giving when he declares to the Corinthians that he is **“testing the genuineness of your love.”** Love must be the motivation for our giving, love for others, of course, but before that a love for the One who has already given so much to us. When we realize what it is that Christ has done for us, sacrificing everything on the cross for us, his love moves us to love in response, and to express that love in generosity, first towards God and then towards those in this world who God loves, which is every person we will ever meet and especially those we meet who are in need.

When love motivates our generosity, however, it doesn’t mean that there are not benefits we receive when we give. Paul writes in the next chapter: **“the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”** It’s a very simple metaphor given by Paul to agrarian people who would have easily understood that if you never sow seed in the ground then all you

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper, 1952), from his section on Social Morality.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Corinthians* (Westminster, 294), 259-260.

will be left with in the end is bird food. I learned this some years ago when I was trying to skimp on some expensive lawn seed I'd purchased and saved half a bag in my storage shed. When I discovered it buried back there a few years later and planted it, nothing grew. I had no idea that grass seed had a shelf life. With our financial resources it is the same. It's only when we sow them that they produce a harvest.

Understand, Paul is not promoting a so-called "health and wealth" gospel here, this idea that when we give away our material possessions God will turn around and give us even more than we had before. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find such an idea. Again, our motivation ought to be love, not self-satisfaction or, worse, greed. But still, the byproducts of our sacrificial giving will not only include an increase in faith but in joy. Don't you remember with fondness those times in life when you gave generously beyond your means and then stood back to watch God bless both those who received your gift and you for giving it. It's why we should never give until it hurts, but always give until it brings joy!

We should also give with great intentionality. Paul writes: **⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.**

Lowell Berry was a wealthy businessman who made his fortune in the commercial fertilizer business. He was also a follower of Christ who gave back a great deal of his wealth to the work of the church in Southern California where he lived. One time somebody asked him how he got started giving. Mr. Berry said that when he was twelve years old his pastor taught him that he ought to give a definite portion of anything he earned back to the Lord. Well, after talking this idea over with his mother, and praying about it himself, he committed himself to doing exactly that even though it wouldn't be another ten years, until after he finished college, when he actually earned anything he could give back. His is a powerful example that it's the decision and not the dollar that creates the giver.⁷

There are certainly times when God wants our giving to be spontaneous and emotion-driven. But as Paul reminds us here, mostly God wants us to "make up our minds" about our giving. Our giving should certainly never be the result of arm-twisting or manipulation. No, we should sit down, as Lowell Berry sat down when he was twelve years old, and talk with others we trust,

and pray, and in some ways let logic guide us towards generosity.

For one, we should never ask, how much of my money should I give to God. That's entirely the wrong question. The right question is how much of God's money should I keep for myself. That's the logical question which then forces us to think carefully about budgets and spending, about what we really need to keep for ourselves and what we really don't need to keep for ourselves. We must also think carefully about what God has already done, letting God's love for us logically motivate us towards loving generosity. Finally, we must also think carefully about God's faithfulness and abundance, remembering that fear of scarcity has no place in the lives of those who follow the One who holds the whole world in his hands.

This is, in fact, what we are all being asked to do this week, at least those of us who are a part of this community. After our service is over, we have a stewardship packet ready for you outside for you to take home. It includes some instructions on how to prepare for Stewardship Commitment Sunday a week from today, and one of the things I want to urge you to do is to use the daily devotion we have included which, beginning tomorrow, will walk you back through this passage in 2nd Corinthians we've been looking at this morning. It's a guide that will help you carefully reflect on what it is that Christ may have to say to you through his Word about giving. It's designed for you to use as an individual, to work through as a couple, or to use as a family if you have kids or grandkids still at home. In fact, there is a special section on here for parents and grandparents, meant to help us all prepare even our youngest kids to make a pledge themselves. As they do, I suspect you will be inspired by the generosity they display.

Now, the easy thing for us to do when we make a financial pledge to God's work in the church is to look at what we gave last year and fill in that same number. I've done that myself. Let's not do that this year. Instead, let's make up our minds carefully, and prayerfully, examining what God has already given to us, not just in material things but in life. Let us examine our motives for giving, leaning away from duty, or self-satisfaction, or prestige, and leaning into love. In fact, I'd ask you not to fill out a pledge card until you've done so, letting this devotional guide you. Then, when you finally do make a pledge, I boldly urge you, as Paul boldly urged the church of his day, to be gratefully generous in whatever ways Jesus leads you to be gratefully generous.

⁷ As told by Kenneth L. Chafin, *The Communicator's Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Word Publishing, 1985), 268.

In turn, here's our pledge to you. I speak for our entire leadership when I promise you that we will similarly think carefully about how God is calling us to designate whatever gifts you offer. Our elders are already thinking carefully and prayerfully about how we are called to invest the gifts given next year in ways that reflect God's purposes for this congregation. As a reminder, we believe God has called Faith Presbyterian Church to be a "community loving Christ, building disciples, and serving all." Our 2018 budget, along with others sorts of resources God has placed into our hands, must reflect this vision. Every penny we use ought to be used for the ultimate glory of Christ alone, whom we love because he first loved us. And Jesus is glorified when we use our resources to equip disciples by helping people here of all ages become more like Jesus in every aspect of their lives. Finally, of course, we must direct our resources beyond ourselves towards the tremendous needs we see in our neighborhood, our city, and beyond. This is how we are called to sow those seeds and I pledge to you that we will do our best to make sure we do so.

And if you want an indicator of what that will look like this coming year, you need only to look at how seeds were sown, and are being sown, this year through the ministry of this congregation. So as I close, let me offer some concrete examples. As I do, respond along the way when I prompt you to do so by saying, "To God's glory alone!"

The seeds you have sown this year through the ministry of this church have enabled us to call staff who now have the support they need to invest their lives in teaching the youngest to the oldest of us God's Word in transformative ways, leading us in worship that honors the Lord who has given us life, caring for those who suffer under tremendous burdens, managing the resources God has given us, and training and equipping us all to give away our lives for the sake of the Kingdom. All of it...**To God's glory alone!**

The seeds you have sown this year have directly supported so many ministries which daily impact lives in eternal ways. In classes and at retreats so many of us grow in the saving knowledge of Christ and learn about his will for our lives. In the Marriage Course, couples, some at the end of their rope, are finding much needed encouragement and healing. People consumed by grief are finding a place here to move towards healing. Young people are finding a place to belong, a place where they are loved from the moment they walk into youth group. Children, even the youngest among us, are learning the story of what God's love has done for us. Musicians of all abilities are discovering the joy of making our music an act of worship. Lifetime

friendships are being formed in small circles around Life Groups and dinner tables. All of it...**To God's glory alone!**

This building is used week after week, day after day, to welcome those from beyond our congregation searching for a place to gather and grow and heal. The addict who comes here for Narcotics Anonymous or the alcoholic for AA. The homeless families who discover here a warm place to sleep, homemade meals for supper, and genuine hospitality from new friends. The 200+ women who gather here from all over the city every Tuesday morning for Bible Study Fellowship to study God's Word, some of them for the very first time. The young adults who meet here Sunday afternoons to find the community and belonging they have been aching for. The Ethiopians in the Orthodox Church who now call this building home. Every single one of them has found a place here because of the seeds this congregation has sown. All of it...**To God's glory alone!**

Finally, thousands and thousands of dollars have been sent out from here this year to support feeding programs for hungry families in our city, tutoring ministries to kids, many of whom are the children of immigrants struggling to find a way forward in a new land, missionaries in faraway places working tirelessly to share the love of Christ with those who have no idea how much they are loved, chickens to families in Kenya whose whole lives can literally be transformed by such a simple gift, and life-saving gifts like clean water to whole communities in Ethiopia who are more desperately poor than any one most of us have ever known. All of it...**To God's glory alone!**

The seeds that you are sowing in the ministry of this congregation are reaping, and will continue to reap, a bountiful harvest! **To God's glory alone!**

So here is my request. It's very simple and very practical. Use the guidance we're providing you this week to take the time you will need to carefully make up your mind as to how Jesus is calling you to give to the kingdom work of this congregation in the year to come. Don't come reluctantly next Sunday; you will have missed the point. Nobody here will ever arm-twist you. It's not our place to do so. Guilt has no place here, nor does comparison. God loves a cheerful giver! He loves a grumpy, reluctant, resentful giver as well. Of course! But the gift they offer, not so much. Because it's not about the gift. It never is. For again, stewardship is not our way of raising money, but rather God's way of raising us into the likeness of His Son, of setting us free, of teaching us faith, of sowing in us joy.

I'll end as Paul ends. Hear his words as a promise, for that is what they are.

⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Once again read the text from II Corinthians 8:1-9, 9:6-9. What do you notice here in Paul's words to the Corinthians about giving?
2. Can you list at least three examples of how Paul holds up the Macedonians as models of generosity?
3. What is it that generally motivates you to be generous when you are generous? Others have said there are four reasons to choose from: duty, self-satisfaction, prestige and love.
4. Consider again the guidance C.S. Lewis gives to us when we are trying to determine how much we should give. What is his point here? Do you agree?

"I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., are up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving too little away. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small."

5. Have you ever given beyond your means and then discovered that God provided for you anyway? What did that do to your faith?
6. Which statement is more true, 'Give until it hurts!' or 'Give until it brings joy!'?

7. Do you like it when we talk about giving and money in church? Why or why not? Either way, what does that say about your perception of God's view of these things?
8. Paul encourages us here, "**give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion.**" What might it look like for you to give in this way, intentionally and thoughtfully?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Take time this week as a family to use the Stewardship Devotional provided in your stewardship packet, walking back through these verses together to learn about God's heart of and for generosity