

## THE GRACE OF GIVING

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-9, 1 CORINTHIANS 16:1-2

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**W**hat makes our giving useful to God? Is it the fact that we give ten percent of everything we get, or is it the condition of our hearts? When it comes to giving, what does God require of us? Is it an actual percentage, or is it an attitude?

In this sermon, I will attempt to answer this question. I will take the position that it is the attitude behind our giving and not the percentage of what we give that really counts, and that attitude can be summed up in one verse taken from our scripture reading. 1 Corinthians 8:9 says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”

This verse uses our Lord as the example of giving that we should follow. This verse says nothing about percentage. The focus, instead, is on attitude. A need stirs the heart, and the heart responds with a desire to give all.

This is in stark contrast to giving that is based on percentage. A person whose giving is based on percentage alone will be motivated to give out of a sense of obligation or duty. The existing need is not the most important factor for that person. Obeying a command is.

But when we look at the way Jesus gave, we discover that He always had the needs of others in mind when he gave. Those who are motivated by need will often go beyond ten percent in their giving, because percentage is not the most important thing. Attitude is.

Such an attitude will change the world—not because it will bring in a lot of revenue to churches—but because it will touch the heart of God who has all the power and all the resources to meet every need.

Now let’s look at our scripture reading again and carefully examine what I believe to be the most important passage in the New Testament relating to Christian giving. It is a passage that places emphasis on the attitude of the heart rather than the actual percentage of our giving. I am going to examine this passage by asking a series of questions.

The first question is, “What is the source of giving found in this passage of scripture?” If we don’t have the kind of attitude I am talking about, then how do we get it? 2 Corinthians 8:1 says, “Brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given.” It must be made clear at the start that the source of Christian giving is God’s grace. It is given to us. We cannot produce it. It comes because God puts the desire in our hearts to help our fellow man and it comes when we experience salvation and receive the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit who gives us both the desire and power to give, it is not possible to experience the kind of giving talked about in 2 Corinthians 8. It is possible for a person to give ten percent without the grace of God, but it is not possible to experience the attitude I am talking about without the grace of God.

The source of this kind of giving is the grace of God. That is the answer to the first question. The second question is this, “What is the ultimate goal of Christian giving?” I have already touched on this by saying a person with this attitude will be driven to help others who have a need. But to say that the goal of this giving is to meet the needs of people still doesn’t get to the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is a desire for fellowship. 2 Corinthians 8:4 says, “They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.” Here the NIV translation does not do justice to the original text. The thing they are pleading for is not just an opportunity to serve. It is not just the opportunity to provide for the financial need of people who are less fortunate. The thing they are pleading for is fellowship. The Greek word *Koinonia* is the actual word used in verse 4. We also find the word *Koinonia* in the book of Acts. There, in the second chapter of Acts, we find a description of fellowship in the early church. As the believers experienced fellowship with each other, they “sold their possessions and goods and gave to anyone as he had need.” Fellowship takes in more than just providing for the financial needs of people. It is more than just handing them a love gift of money. Fellowship goes beyond money. Fellowship strives to care for the entire needs of a person in order to bring that person into a closer relationship with God. The ultimate goal of our Lord’s giving was to make fellowship possible. Money has never been the greatest need people have. Fellowship with God and other people God has and always will be the greatest need of people. Money is only a tool to help people experience fellowship.

When my family served on the mission field, we would often receive love gifts of money from people. We were thankful for those gifts, because we needed them to make ends meet. However money only represented a fraction of our need. We also had emotional and spiritual needs. We needed people to talk to us and pray for us. We desperately needed fellowship and felt lonely without it.

The source of Christian giving is grace. The ultimate goal of Christian

giving is fellowship. The third question deals with method or process of Christian giving, and it relates to everything I have just stated. When we are driven by grace to have fellowship with those who are in need, then what is the process of developing that fellowship? I believe 1 Corinthians 8:5 suggests to us a two-step process. That verse says, “And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”

When appeals for money are given, we often respond out of a sense of duty toward those in authority over us. That is what’s expected. As church leaders, Paul and Titus made an appeal to the Church in Macedonia for funds. But instead of just giving money to the church leaders as expected, the Church in Macedonia did something first. They first gave themselves to the Lord. What does that mean? I am not exactly sure all that it meant for the Church in Macedonia, but I think it at least meant that they took the need to the Lord in prayer. And in order to do that, they must have had some information about the need. The first step in the process of Christian giving is to become spiritually and emotionally engaged with the need.

You see, it is possible to give money to the mission fund without really knowing to whom we are giving and why. The disadvantage of promoting missions once a year is that few people become exposed to the need. As a result, few people pray. Outside of Ray Lee and Angela Wang and a couple of other people, how many are aware of the names of the career missionaries and the names of the organizations supported by our church. The information is available. It is printed up in a pamphlet that is distributed once a year, during our mission conference.

But for many of us, this is not enough for us to become engaged emotionally and spiritually with the need. We need to work hard at becoming informed of the needs around us and we need to bring what information we have along with ourselves before the throne of grace and plead for wisdom to know how to meet the needs. That goes for missions as well as every need that comes our way. This process should be done corporately, and it should also be done on an individual basis. This is not what is expected. The only thing expected is the giving of money. But without this first step in the process of Christian giving, it is next to impossible to maintain a proper attitude. Our giving will eventually revert back to giving that is driven by obligation rather than a desire to meet a need. Go to the Lord first with the need and then give the money—that is the process of giving suggested in our scripture reading.

But this is very hard to do, and I will be the first to admit my own failure at doing it. I don’t know about you, but I receive so many appeals for money that I have become somewhat numb and reluctant to give. I sometimes give out of a sense of obligation or guilt because the person asking for money is so persistent.

Now I don’t think it is a sin to give out of a sense of obligation, but I never feel real comfortable when I do. I feel like something is missing. And something is missing. It is the first step in the process of Christian giving that is missing.

Recently I did have the opportunity to experience the joy of giving that comes from participating in both steps of the process. Someone going on a short-term mission trip actually sat down and talked with me about his trip. He shared his hopes and his challenges. He shared with me how much money he had to raise. He did not ask me to give him money, but what he shared touched my heart. It made me want to take the need before my Lord, and giving then became a joy.

The source of Christian giving, the goal of Christian giving, the process of Christian giving...all these things are revealed in 2 Corinthians 8:1-9. In sharing with you the source and goal and process of Christian giving, I want you to see the emphasis is not on the percentage of money we give; rather, the emphasis is on the heart attitude behind our giving. And yet, people still cry out for practical advice. People still want some kind of formula that can be used to calculate how much they should give.

So I will conclude this message with some practical advice. The words recorded in 1 Corinthians 16:2 will serve as my outline.

The first bit of advice is that everyone should give. Verse 2 emphasizes that giving is the responsibility of each person. Verse 2 does not say, “Each family unit should set aside a sum of money.” Rather it says, “Each one of you should set aside a sum of money.” Some of you do not give, because you don’t have an income and your parents give for you. What difference will the dollar from your allowance make when your parents are giving hundreds of dollars? The answer to the question is this: The one dollar may do more for the kingdom of God than the hundreds of dollars if you follow the principles from 2 Corinthians 8 that I just shared with you. Again, the important thing is not the amount. It is your attitude. A small amount given with the right attitude will do much to move the heart of God and bring about revival. Children should not be deprived of giving. Every one of us who claim to be a Christian should give, and parents should do their part in encouraging their children to give.

The second bit of advice I will offer is that giving should be regular. 1 Corinthians 16:2 suggests doing it the first day of the week. The point is that it should be done on a regular basis. This is practical advice that helps us remember the need on a regular basis. But the people who are really helped when we give on a regular basis are those who receive the money. Ministry goes on year-round, and bills must be paid on a regular basis. When those giving miss a bunch of weeks or

months in their giving and then catch up at the end of the year, it makes it very hard on those who depend on the funds to live and work day by day.

And the final words of practical advice are these: Be careful to readjust your giving so it remains in keeping with your income. Verse 2 says, "On the first day of the week everyone should lay aside a sum of money in keeping with his income." Here we come back to the practical question of how to calculate the amount that should be given. The most popular advice seems to be, start out by giving a tenth of your salary.

Now for some people, that might be excellent advice; while for others, it might lead to their ruin. Some people will give a strict one-tenth of their income to the church and, at the same time, do much harm to their souls with the remaining nine-tenths. It is wrong to give one-tenth to the church and think that the rest is mine. It all belongs to God, and every dollar I have God has given to me to spend in a way that will bring glory to His Name. When calculating the portion we give, we should seriously consider the standard of living God wants us to have.

Last week I heard the testimony of a doctor who, at the beginning of his career, determined that he would put a cap on his standard of living. He made that decision knowing full well that his salary would increase significantly as the years went on. Now he makes a large salary but still lives the same way he did when he began his practice. As a result, he is able to give huge sums of money to support ministry, far beyond ten percent of his salary.

Determining the standard of living that God wants us to have is probably the most important factor in calculating the portion we should give to ministry. Unfortunately few of us take time to do this. We forget that everything we have belongs to God, and we allow society to determine for us what are standard of living should be.

Whatever the portion of our giving is, it should be calculated and readjusted when our income changes. And I personally believe that the portion we give should cause us to go beyond our comfort zone. The portion of money we give should financially challenge us. If the portion we give causes us to exercise our faith, then this is good. If the amount of money we give causes no pain and no sense of loss whatsoever, then it is probably not enough.

Although 1 Corinthians 16:2 does not clearly state that the primary portion of our giving should go to the local church to which we belong, this is common sense. Local churches depend on the support from their members to function. Meeting the needs of our local churches should be top priority.

Today my sermon is directed as much to myself as it is to the rest of you. Things have changed dramatically for my family since returning from the mission field. I am now faced with decisions I did not have to make before. On the mission field we had a set standard of living. It was a standard of living that was easy to maintain, because all the other missionaries had the same standard of living. Now decisions are not so easy and we are experiencing the same struggles many of you are experiencing. Should we purchase a home? Should we put money aside to purchase another car when the one we have eventually gives out? How much money should we save up for retirement? How we answer these questions will have an affect on the portion of money we end up giving to the Lord. May God help us and the rest of you who are working through some of these issues. May God help us all experience the grace of giving.

**Do you feel comfortable with the amount of money from your income you donate to the church? Do you have any questions? How can others pray for you as you attempt to apply the principles contained in today's Scripture reading?**