

Generosity

The subject of giving comes up fairly frequently in churches. Whenever churches start having budget problems the pastor preaches a sermon on tithing. Whenever a church wants to expand or renovate something they ask their congregation to give them more money. Churches spend a lot of time trying to get as much money out of their congregations as they possibly can. There are a lot of issues that churches tend to overlook, but giving isn't one of them.

Since I have already talked about tithing elsewhere I'm not going to repeat that here¹. Instead I'd like to discuss something else: the subject of generosity. God has commanded Christians to be compassionate and generous. Now, whenever someone mentions generosity people often think about tithing but that's not what I want to examine today. Instead I want to offer a different perspective on life. It's easy to forget our calling and purpose. In the rush and pressures of daily life we sometimes forget who we are, why we're here, and what we're supposed to be doing. We get side-tracked and lose sight of what's truly important.

In 2 Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul tells us something amazing. The desperately-poor Christians in Macedonia raised money to meet the needs of others! Even though these people had serious financial needs of their own, they cared so much about the needs of others that they gave despite their own affliction:

2 Corinthians 8:1-2: “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of

1 For an examination of why tithing isn't Biblical, see: <http://stories.cyragon.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Modern-Practice-Of-Tithing-Is-Not-Biblical.pdf>

their liberality.”

Even though this church was extremely poor, they still cared about the needs of others and they still gave. In fact, they were so passionate that they wouldn't take no for an answer. They insisted on making this gift:

2 Corinthians 8:3-4: “For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; Praying us **with much intreaty** that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.”

Why did they do this? Because of their abundance of joy and their deep love for their fellow Christians. They didn't do it because they wanted to receive something in return or because they wanted to prove something. They did it out of love.

There are some televangelists who will tell you that if you give sacrificially then God will repay you. Some people on television say “Just send me a check for \$1000 and watch God multiply it tenfold! All of your financial worries will be solved if you just give me money.” There are even pastors who fall into this trap by telling their congregations that if they give money to God then God will give it back to them.

These people are claiming that you can get money from God if you give money to Him first. In other words, they're urging you to bribe God so He will bless you financially. If you want God to meet your needs then you have to pay Him first. Once you've paid off God He will act on your behalf.

That teaching is nonsense. The apostle Peter had harsh words for one man who thought he could purchase gifts from God:

Acts 8:20: “But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that

the gift of God may be purchased with money.”

In this particular case the man was trying to buy a gift of the Spirit, but the principle is the same. *You cannot bribe God!* God isn't a vending machine that will operate once you put coins in the slot. The truth is that God blesses you and watches over you because He loves you – and He loved you long before you ever loved Him (1 John 4:19). The reason He meets your needs is because He cares about you. What kind of parent only helps their son if he pays them first? What would you think of a parent like that?

Yet that's how some pastors tell us to think about God! Stop and think about it. When did Jesus die for us? Was it after we had paid Him enough money or had done Him enough favors? No, it was while we were *His enemies*:

Romans 5:6-8: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

Some people think that they have to earn God's blessings, but that's not the case. If you're giving money to God in order to get something back from Him then you've completely misunderstood who God is. That's the wrong reason to be giving money to the church! Besides, God never promised to give you \$5 back for every dollar you give to Him. If you think that giving money to God is some sort of guaranteed get-rich-quick scheme then you have lost your way.

It's true that God has promised Heavenly rewards to those who serve Him:

Matthew 19:21: “Jesus said unto him, If thou

wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.”

The subject of Heavenly treasure is a fascinating one, but since I've already discussed it elsewhere I won't repeat that discussion here². The point I want to make is that although Jesus promised Heavenly rewards to those who serve Him, He never promised that when we give money to Him in this life He would return the favor by sending us checks in the mail. He also never said that He would only provide for our needs if we first paid Him. God simply doesn't work that way.

God's love for us is vast and deep. It's so strong that nothing can separate us from it. Paul was very clear about this:

Romans 8:35-39: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul doesn't say “If you want God to love you then you must pay Him first.” He never says that God's love for you depends on your financial contributions. The truth is that *nothing* can separate you from God! Not death, or life, or angels, or

2 For an examination of Heavenly treasure, see: <http://stories.cyragon.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/HeavenlyTreasure.pdf>

anything.

Why were the Macedonians willing to give out of their extreme property? It's because they understood what God had called them to do. They understood that they were God's servants and they wanted to be about the Father's business. They knew they were here to build God's kingdom so that was their priority.

Do you remember what Christ commanded us to do in the Sermon on the Mount?

Matthew 6:31-33: "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Jesus told us to seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. *That's our life mission!* That should be the focus of our time, our efforts, and our money.

Here's something to think about. Can we honestly say that we are focused on our Father's business? If we step back and take a look at our life can we honestly say that our lives are centered on the kingdom of God? Is that what we're doing? I'm not asking how much you're giving to the church; this is much bigger than that. When you stand before God and are judged (2 Corinthians 5:10), will you be able to tell Him that your life was focused on building His kingdom?

The reason the Macedonians were able to give generously is because they were focused on the Father's business. Their heart was in the right place and they were a people of great compassion. When they realized there were other Christians who were in need they moved to meet those needs, even though they had to pay a price to do so. They didn't do this to get God to do them a favor; they did it because they saw a need and they wanted

to meet it. The Macedonians gave out of love, and they were able to give freely and without hesitation because they understood their purpose in life. They knew what they were here to do.

One of the things Jesus warned us about was getting so entangled in the cares of this world that we become useless for God:

Mark 4:18-19: “And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.”

It's possible to become so entangled in “the lusts of other things” that we become unfruitful. We can become so distracted by our lives and our desires that we forget why we're here and what we're supposed to be doing. God hasn't called us to get rich and fulfill all of our desires. He hasn't called us to be like the world and follow them in their pursuit of pleasure. Instead He commanded us to die to ourselves, take up the cross, and follow Him:

Mark 8:34: “And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

Jesus commanded us to die to our own will and to live to God's will. He wants us to focus on what God wants, not on what we want. That's what it means to deny ourselves. There are many things which we want in life that have nothing to do with God. You can either spend your life serving yourself and doing what you want, or you can spend it serving God and doing what He wants. You can't do both! God has called you to die to your will and live to His.

This is the secret to generosity. If we're trying to amass as much wealth as we can then generosity is going to be painful. If generosity makes our lives more difficult by interfering with what we want then we'll tend to avoid it or view it with displeasure. However, if our goal is to serve God and nurture the body of Christ then being generous isn't going to be a problem because it will align with our purpose and goals. In that case being generous will be a lot easier.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he wanted them to demonstrate the same generosity and compassion the Macedonians had shown:

2 Corinthians 8:6-8: “Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also. Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.”

Why was Paul so insistent about this? Because he wanted the Corinthians to “prove the sincerity” of their love. It's easy to tell someone “I love you”. Words are cheap; they don't cost us very much. Deeds, though, are a different matter. It's one thing to tell someone you love them. It's something else entirely to reach into your pocket and meet their financial needs. It's all well and good to *tell* people that you love them, but until you put your love into action your love isn't really very helpful to them. If you want to prove that your love is sincere then you need to act upon it. In other words, you need to put your money where your mouth is.

This is how James put it:

James 2:15-17: “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say

unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”

This is something we need to take to heart. It's not enough to tell people “Go in peace; be warm and happy”! We need to *meet their needs*. We need to do more than just say that we care about people; we need to put our faith into action and provide for them. That's what the Macedonians did (even though they were very poor themselves!), and that's what Paul commanded the Corinthians to do. Love shouldn't exist on its own! It ought to produce works. If it's not producing works then it's dead.

Keep in mind that God isn't asking us to do something that He hasn't done Himself. Do you remember the tremendous sacrifice that He made on our behalf?

2 Corinthians 8:9: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.”

Jesus didn't just *say* that He loved us. Instead He showed it by laying aside His glory and coming to this world to suffer and die for us. He became poor for our sakes so that we might be rich. He put His love into action and met our needs, and He calls us to do the same to others. Jesus gave up more than we can imagine in order to meet our desperate needs. What are we willing to give up to meet the needs of those around us?

It's true that some people have more to give than others. But God wants us to give what we have, not what we don't have:

2 Corinthians 8:11-15: “Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance

also out of that which ye have. For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack.”

If we give willingly (not reluctantly or grudgingly) then God will accept whatever we have. We may not have as much to give as others, but the same was true for the Macedonians. They didn't give out of their great wealth; instead they gave out of their poverty. They could have said that since they had so little to give there was no use in even bothering, but they didn't. Instead they willingly and lovingly gave to God what they *did* have.

Do you remember the story of the widow who gave two mites?

Luke 21:1-4: "And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had."

The actual amount that the poor widow gave was negligible, and yet it impressed Christ far more than the large gifts that the rich gave. The reason for this is because the rich gave out of their wealth and would never miss the money they

were giving. They were so wealthy that they could give large gifts to the temple without interfering with their lifestyle in any way. The poor widow, though, was different. She literally gave everything she had. Since she gave what she had to give, that pleased God. The Macedonians learned this lesson and took it to heart. They didn't have much, but they gave what they had – and they could do that because they had their priorities straight. They understood what life was all about.

Christ commands Christians to care for one another. Since the Macedonians had something they could give, they gave it to those who needed it. If one day the Macedonians were in dire need then other churches were to provide for them. That's how the members of the body were to care for one another.

This doesn't mean Christians are required to take a vow of poverty. Some people think that God requires Christians to be poor, and that being poor is somehow more spiritual than being rich. That's not the case! What God commands us to do is *not* to be poor, but to be generous – and those are very different things. There are some people in the Bible who were very wealthy, and the reason they had their wealth because God gave it to them. Solomon is an example of this:

1 Kings 3:11-13: “And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days.”

Solomon didn't ask for great wealth but God gave it to him anyway. Having wealth isn't a sin. The problem arises when we lose sight of Christ and start thinking that we're here to build kingdoms for ourselves. The question isn't "How much money do you have?", but rather "What are you going to do with whatever God has given to you?"

There are some people who interpret this teaching as an endorsement of communism. However, that's a very serious error. Under communism people aren't allowed to keep what they earn. Instead the fruits of their labor are taken from them by force and given to others. Communism is a demonic system; it's nothing more than institutionalized theft. It's very important to God that people are allowed to reap what they sow and enjoy the work of their hands. In fact, that is one of the blessings of the millennium:

Isaiah 65:22: "They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands."

Communism is a direct attack on that verse. Under communism one person plants and another person eats it. A man's work is taken from him by force and given to someone else. God sees that as a great evil and He intends to stamp it out. In the millennium people will keep what they've earned. Their wages won't be confiscated and given to others. Instead people will "long enjoy the work of their hands".

There's a *tremendous* difference between giving to someone who's in need, and taking money by force to give to someone else. That difference is very profound. Asking your neighbor for help is fine; breaking into his house and stealing his possessions is not. If someone asks you for money and you give it to them then that's fine. However, if someone steals your wallet and takes your money then that's *not* fine. In both cases the person

may end up with your money, but the way the person obtains it *really matters* to God! You don't have permission to steal from others to meet your needs. God made this quite clear:

Proverbs 6:30-31: “Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry; But if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house.”

God commands that those who steal from others *make restitution*. He doesn't say “Well, as long as you need the money then it's fine. Just make sure you steal from the rich who can afford it.” Stealing is always wrong, no matter how much you need the money.

In conclusion, God commands Christians to demonstrate their love for one another by giving out of a willing heart:

2 Corinthians 9:7: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

How much should we give? “As he purposeth in his heart”. The main thing God is concerned about is that we work to meet one another's needs – and that we do so cheerfully and willingly.