

2 Corinthians 9:6-12 – Generous & Willing

Intro

- We will be taking a few weeks' break from going through the Gospel of John.
 - o There are 5 Sundays before VBS so I was planning on doing my usual summer series where I give you the "grown up version" of the 5 VBS lessons.
 - o It turns out, this year's lessons focus on the life of Christ so it would be a lot of repeating what I've already been preaching in John.
 - o So rather than do that, I'm going to use this already-planned break in the John series to do a few topical sermons related to where we are as a church and the society we live in.

- The first topic, prompted by a request from the combined board as we discussed that general fund giving is about 20% behind budget, is on biblical principles for giving.
 - o The topic of financial giving can be a sensitive one because some churches/ pastors give the impression that getting their hands on your money is their main goal.
 - o In two different places I have lived there were strong feelings against churches in general because of specific churches in the area that clearly ran on greed.
 - From almost the beginning, there have been people who use the church, the Bible, and the name of Jesus as a tool of greedy exploitation (2 Peter 2:1-3).
 - This does harm to individuals, to the reputation of the church, and to the credibility of the Gospel. For this, God will judge such people severely.
 - o However, their misuse and twisting of the teachings of Scripture about financial giving should not cause us to abandon those teachings.

- The Bible does have a lot to say about giving as a form of worship and as a means of supporting the work of God.
 - o This sermon is kind of a "remix" of one from not quite 2 years ago when we were studying Acts, so if you've been here a while, most of it should sound pretty familiar, but it's good to be reminded from time to time of principles for basic Christian living.
 - o A lot of churches/pastors focus primarily on "Thou shalt tithe" (give 10% of income) and pull out a lot of Old Testament verses to make you feel guilty if you don't.
 - o To do so puts the primary focus very much in the wrong place for us as New Testament believers living in the era of the church after Christ has fulfilled the Law.
 - We can (and should) learn from examples in the OT, and that's where we are going to start...
 - ...but we cannot confuse living under Law with living under Grace.

Giving in the Old Testament (Some Highlights & Principles)

- Genesis 4:3-7 – from the very first recorded act of worship, worship has included giving back to God a portion of what he has blessed you with.
 - (3-5) We see Cain the farmer giving a portion of his crops and Abel the shepherd giving one of his best sheep.
 - We do not know what kind of worship instructions they had from God at this point in human history.
 - Under the much later OT Law given through Moses there were appropriate sacrifices of both animals and crops depending on the occasion & purpose.
 - Something was wrong with Cain's offering.
 - (6-7) What God gives as the root problem is Cain allowing sin to have some degree of control in his life.
 - This is the first instance of a principle that is continually linked with offering and giving in Scripture:
 - God does not want what is given to him if it comes with a sinful attitude or from a person living in flagrant unrepentant sin.
- As history moves along, we see various godly people (like Noah) offering sacrifices to God until we come to the first two instances that could be regarded as voluntary tithing.
 - Genesis 14:18-20 – Abraham gives a one-time gift of 10% of recently acquired plunder to a priest of God named Melchizedek.
 - Genesis 28:20-22 – Jacob vows to worship God and give him 10% of everything he receives if God will bless him and watch over him.
 - This doesn't mean everyone gave 10% all the time, but it shows that God's people regarded it as an appropriate amount when voluntarily deciding how much to give.
- Later, under the Law given at Mt. Sinai, tithing became mandatory for all Israelites.
 - The Law is that system of precepts and commandments (613 by rabbinic count) revealed as part of God's covenant with the nation of Israel in Exodus-Deuteronomy.
 - It governed every aspect of life including moral behavior, worship, civil & criminal law, dietary restrictions, health regulations, dress & grooming, etc.
 - Tithing was included to support/encourage tabernacle worship, to provide a living for the Levites, and to help the poor.
 - There were actually two or three separate tithes:
 - Leviticus 27:30 / Numbers 18 – 10% of the year's gain was given to support the priests, Levites, & tabernacle (later the temple).
 - Deuteronomy 14:22-27 – 10% was set aside to celebrate religious festivals in Jerusalem (this is may be the same tithe, just phrased differently).
 - Deuteronomy 14:28-29 – an additional 10% is given once every three years to help support the Levites as well as the poor & vulnerable (sojourners, fatherless, & widows).

- As with many commands in the OT Law, this was not necessarily carefully followed, but it is what God expected of his chosen nation of Israel.
- For Israelite's these tithes (totaling 13.3% or 23.3%) were the bare minimum of giving.
 - They were encouraged to make voluntary offerings to God as well. For example:
 - Offerings of thanks to commemorate a blessing from God (e.g. Psalm 50:23).
 - Gifts for special opportunities to be a part of what God is doing, like the building of the tabernacle (Exodus 36:5-7).
 - Under this system, there is still the principle that God did not accept offerings (or any other worship) that came from an unrepentantly sinful heart (e.g. Isaiah 1:16-17)
 - Throughout the OT there is also the principle that when the Israelites were stingy or neglectful in supporting God's work, they forfeited God's blessing (e.g. Haggai 1:9-11)
- As we get ready to move on to the New Testament, we need to remember that Christians are not under Israel's Old Testament Law (Galatians 5:1-6).
 - The Galatians were trying to add one of the requirements of the Law (circumcision) to the requirements of being righteous before God.
 - (1) Jesus fulfilled the Law and freed us from it...we are not supposed to place ourselves back under its power and requirements.
 - (3) If you place yourself under one requirement of the Law (whether circumcision, tithing, or not eating pork & shellfish), you place yourself under the whole thing.
 - (2, 4) If we are trying to be righteous by living according to the Law, we are acting apart from Christ and are not living according to the grace of God.
 - (5-6) Our life is supposed to be characterized by faith working through love, not a checklist of rules taken from Israel's Law that has already been fulfilled by Christ.
- All that to say, giving exactly 10% (or 13.3% or 23.3%) is never directly commanded to Christians of the church age. It was only mandatory for God's people under the OT Law.
 - Some pastors know this but are afraid to preach it because they are afraid of the financial consequences to the church...and I've had deacons/trustees at previous churches get upset at me when I make this point.
 - I must preach the whole counsel of God. It would be sinful to allow you to believe something false simply because I think it will somehow benefit the church.
 - As long as a person's heart is right before God and they prayerfully seek to follow the New Testament principles of giving, church finances will be just fine without me trying to make you feel guilty by wrongly brandishing a requirement of the OT Law.

Giving in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

- Context: Paul is writing to the church in Corinth about money they are collecting to help the Christians at the church in Jerusalem, and in doing this he states some general principles that broadly apply to our financial giving.

- (6) The opening illustration is of a farmer: the more grain a farmer plants (rather than keeping it stored away), the bigger his harvest will be.
 - i.e. Greater generosity brings greater blessing, and stinginess deprives us of blessing
 - We already saw how this same principle played out in Israel's history.

- (7) Each person must decide between themselves and God what they are willing to give.
 - This is a continuation of that principle we saw in the OT of a person's heart needs to be right with God for their outward worship to be acceptable to him.
 - God does not want money that is given reluctantly or because we feel forced into it.
 - But he loves it when we are happy about giving; when we regard it as an act of love and service rather than a tiresome duty.

- Are there any guidelines on how much I should give as I determine an amount between me and God?
 - The commonly stated "10% is the bare minimum" is nowhere in the NT.
 - We *do* see Abraham and Jacob giving that amount voluntarily before any kind of tithe was made mandatory by the Law.
 - For that reason, a lot of people do see it as a good starting point, and there is nothing wrong with voluntarily doing that.
 - The closest the NT comes to giving us an amount is to say that we should give proportionally.
 - 1 Corinthians 16:2 speaks of giving in proportion to your ability/income: the idea is that usually the more a person makes, the more they are able to give.
 - E.g. someone people determined to give X% of their income to God, so as their income goes up, their giving will go up accordingly.
 - E.g. Some people decide that when their income goes up, they will continue to live on approximately the same amount and give most (or even all) of the increase to God.
 - The New Testament also commends those who give sacrificially.
 - Mark 12:41-44 – Jesus is most pleased with the widow who put in 1/64 days wage (~\$1.56 at MI minimum wage) than he was with the rich people putting in large amounts of money.
 - The rich people had given up some of their surplus, but she gave money that she normally would have used for daily necessities.
 - Similarly, in the early chapters of Acts (e.g. 2:44-47) we see Christians so serious about meeting financial needs that they were selling off property & possessions so that they could help each other financially.
 - Remember, the greatest commandment is to love God with *all* that you are, not just give him the leftovers.

- (8-11) As we give, God supplies our needs and blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.
 - o Some people twist this into the “prosperity Gospel,” treating it as a promise that if you give generously God will make you rich.
 - E.g. “tithe 10% of what you want your income to be and God will give you that income” or “plant a seed of \$1,000.”
 - That is an incredibly worldly way of looking at this. God is not a get rich quick scheme, & a desire to be rich is the path to sin and sorrow (1 Timothy 6:9-10)
 - So what is God promising if not immediate financial rewards?
 - o The harvest is righteousness (10), further opportunities to generously serve God (11a), and the thanksgiving to God that results from that generosity (11b).
 - i.e. Using our money (as well as possessions, time, talents, etc.) to serve God produces things of eternal value (treasures in heaven), drawing us and others closer to God both now and in eternity.
 - And if we don’t see that as being of more value than being rich right now, it shows that our heart is tied to this world rather than to our Father’s kingdom (Matthew 6:19-21).

- (12-14) God uses generous giving in a variety of ways.
 - o God uses generous giving to provide for physical needs, which can include:
 - Helping financially struggling Christians in other churches (like the offering being discussed in this chapter)
 - Helping financially struggling Christians in your own church (Acts 2:45).
 - Supporting the spread of the Gospel and work of the ministry at home and abroad:
 - Romans 16:3-5 (providing for the church meeting place)
 - 1 Timothy 5:17-18 (providing for your local pastor)
 - Philippians 4:15-16 (providing for missionaries)
 - o Generous giving provides glory, thanks, and praise to God as the ultimate source of all good things, including through the generosity of his obedient people.
 - o Generous giving brings brothers and sisters in Christ closer together as they share in the ministry of the Gospel, thank God for each other, and pray for each other.

- (15) Ultimately, giving a portion of what God has given to us back to him is one way of thanking him for the infinitely loving and gracious gift he has given us.
 - o If you have never received the gift of complete forgiveness, a transformed life, and assurance of an eternal home in heaven, do so today!
 - o For those of us who have, what we do with the money and possessions he has entrusted to us shows how much we value the eternal life he has given us.
 - Do we contribute to things of eternal value?

- Or do we have all our focus on acquiring and holding onto stuff in this present world that will be gone in the blink of an eye compared to eternity?

Application: Follow the NT Principles of Giving

- The amount is between you and God.
 - He cares about what is going on in our heart and only wants what we are willing to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion.
 - For a lot of people, having a certain dollar amount or percentage of income that you regularly give as a minimum is helpful & keeps you from giving God just the leftovers.
 - E.g. I have an account set up so that a day or two after I get my paycheck a certain amount automatically gets sent to the church through our online giving so I don't forget about it & am not tempted to spend it on stuff for me.
 - Something like that helps me; between you and God, find what helps make giving to God a regular part of your life.
 - Of course, we realize that even if we have a certain amount that we regularly give, we need to be alert and willing to take other opportunities God gives us beyond that when we see a need and have the means to help.
- Side note: there was fairly recently brought to my attention another kind of giving besides directly helping an individual or donating to a ministry or church.
 - Some people choose to also give by including in their will that a certain percent of their estate goes to support a ministry, whether through an endowment or something similar.
 - If that is something that sounds interesting to you, Heidi Bartle can help you with information on that.
- God values giving that is generous and sacrificial.
 - When we forgo purchasing something that we would like to have or accumulating a bigger bank balance in favor of helping someone in need or supporting the work of making & maturing disciples, it reflects the loving heart of God.
 - It shows that we value things beyond this present life.
- God rewards giving that is motivated by eternal values.
 - Not necessarily with financial prosperity here and now.
 - With the opportunity to be part of what he is doing in the world: bringing people into his glorious kingdom, drawing them into the shared life of the family of God.
 - With the ultimate award of one day hearing from God himself, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of the Lord."
 - "Welcome to the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundation of the earth..."

- ...your true home that you have been preparing for all your life, where any sacrifice pales in comparison to what I have in store for you.