

**THE GENEROSITY OF GIVING
(2) PRACTICING GENEROSITY**

2 Corinthians 8:10-24

Jeffrey S. Carlson

(With material inspired by *The Grace of Giving* by John Stott)

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INTRODUCTION

Today marks the second in a three-part series exploring Paul's teaching on Christian giving as found in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9. In these chapters Paul is explaining arrangements for an offering from the Greek churches in Macedonia and Achaia to help the struggling churches in Judea.

For Paul, not all giving is helpful. So he provides guidelines to make sure that it is helpful. To put it another way, the practice of generosity needs to answer three questions in the affirmative based on three different passages in chapter 8.

SCRIPTURE

And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— ¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have (2 Corinthians 8:10-12 NRSV).

1. IS THE GIVING PROPORTIONATE?

In order to practice helpful generosity we need to ask, "Is our giving proportionate?"

During the previous year the Corinthian Christians had been the first to say that they would be willing to give to the cause of helping the Judean Christians. So now Paul urges them to complete what they had begun by matching their words with their actions. He tells them this must be according to their means. Christian giving must be proportionate giving.

It starts with the heart. Our desire must be sincere. As long as that is there then the gift is acceptable in proportion to what the giver has. This practice is found, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles:

The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea (Acts 11:29 NRSV).

This is the principle of proportional giving. Proportional giving is not reluctant giving. If we think that giving means parting with what is ours absolutely then we are most reluctant to do so. A father gave his little boy two quarters – one for the boy to spend as he wished and one for the offering at church. On his way there, one of them slipped from his fingers and rolled down a grating. “Oh, Lord,” he said, “There goes your quarter.”

The truth is, all of life is a gift and everything in it belongs to God (Ps 24:1). We do not really own anything. Rather, we are managers of God’s resources. Our goal in life needs to be to find out what the Spirit of God wants us to do with the resources at our disposal.

Proportional giving is not haphazard giving. Many Christians do not think about giving until the offering plate is passed. And even then they quickly look into their wallet or purse and grab the lowest denomination available. Haphazard giving is not particularly helpful for the Lord’s work, though it may be helpful to those outside the church. Clara Null writes about living in a small town with one bank and three churches. She says, “Early one Monday morning, the bank called all three churches with the same request: ‘Could you bring in Sunday’s collection right away? We’re out of \$1 bills.’”

In contrast, proportional giving means gratefully and intentionally giving back to God a portion of what God has given to us. From the early days of the Old Testament, God’s people have observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had back to God. A gift offered to God was called the *first fruits* or the *tithe*, and it consisted of one-tenth of one’s flocks or crops or income. The portion was equal for all (10%) even though the quantity varied according to one’s means.

As Christians who live under the new covenant, we are not bound by the Law of Moses for our salvation. Salvation is a gift of God through faith in Jesus Christ. But we do look to the Law of Moses as a guide for living and for knowledge of how to please God. Many Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives, and one that is pleasing to God. Still, tithing can be a challenging idea for many of us. If 10% does not work for you then choose a percentage that does.

According to Robert Bohl of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, on average Presbyterians give 1.5 percent of their annual income to the church. If you settle on this percentage then maybe you need to consider including the following in your prayers before bed:

Dear God, thank you that you made such a beautiful world and placed me in it. Thank you that you have given me life and purpose. I am thankful for the relationship that I have with you that you initiated by what your Son did on the cross for me – paying the price for my sin, redeeming and reconciling me. Thank you for your forgiveness, your grace, for eternal life and your

undying love for me. And now to show you how truly grateful I am, Lord, for all that you have done for me and are doing for me, and will do for me, I have decided to become an average Presbyterian. Amen.

Really? That's what you're going to tell God for all he's done for you?

In Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and his Barns (Luke 12:13-21) Jesus stresses the importance of being rich towards God. We can be rich toward God by using a portion of what we receive on an ongoing basis. Once a month (or whatever) we receive funds that we have to make decisions about. We buy food, cover the rent, and pay our other bills. It is also from these funds that we typically make any donations.

Churches generally operate on donations from the money people have received as incomes. When the preacher talks about tithing or proportional giving, he or she is referring to the resources we receive. When the offering plate is passed on Sunday morning the message is to give from what we have received. This is consistent with the teaching of the New Testament:

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income (1 Cor 16:2 TNIV).

We can be rich toward God if we use a portion of what we receive. We can also be rich toward God if we use a portion of what we accumulate. This is what author J. Clif Christopher calls the second pocket. He writes:

This is the pocket that stores our accumulated resources. In it are stocks, bonds, pieces of property, insurance policies, savings accounts, and inheritances we may have received and put away. They are resources that we are certainly going to be held accountable for because they have been entrusted into our care, but they are not a part of our regular cash flow. We do not look into this pocket when we think about going to the movies or buying a new shirt or getting our groceries. Nor is this the pocket we go to when considering what to give to the church each week. These assets were set aside for another purpose. However, those purposes change and the assets are not fully utilized. They wind up just sitting there.

I am struck by Christopher's observation that we generally do not consider this pocket when we give to the work of the church. If there is a special campaign, like the Campaign for Renewal, we may consider it, but otherwise we seem not to do so. Yet every college I know of makes regular appeals to this pocket and not just during a capital campaign! Now education is important and supporting one's alma mater is a fine thing to do. But

building the kingdom of God is a great thing to do. Surely this cause merits a portion of our accumulated resources.

But whether we are talking about what we receive or what we accumulate, in order to practice helpful generosity we need to ask, “Is our giving proportionate?”

SCRIPTURE

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15 NRSV).

2. DOES IT CONTRIBUTE TO EQUALITY?

In order to practice helpful generosity we need to ask, “Does our giving contribute to equality?”

This is the kind of generosity that Paul wants the Corinthians to practice. He is not telling them to give up everything so that the Judean Christians can become affluent. That would be solving one problem by creating another. At present, Corinthian abundance can supply the needs of others so that at a later stage the abundance of others can supply Corinthian need. This is what Paul calls “a fair balance” or what we might call equality.

Paul illustrates this principle from the story of the manna in the wilderness. God provided enough for everybody. Large families gathered a lot, but not too much. Smaller families gathered less, but not too little, and they had no lack (Ex 16:17-18).

The word that Paul uses is *isotes*. It can be translated as “equality” or “justice.” It is a quality for which we are to strive.

Biblical equality is not the same as egalitarianism. God’s intent is not that everybody receives an identical wage, lives in an identical house, wears identical clothing and eats identical food as though we were all mass produced in some celestial factory. God has not cloned us.

Biblical equality means each person is equal in worth and dignity. Each person is made equally in the image of God. Yes, God makes the sun shine and the rain to fall indiscriminately on both the good and the bad. But God has made us each different and has given his creation a colorful diversity in physique, appearance, temperament, and capacities.

Biblical equality also means that each person is given the opportunity to become everything God intends them to become. For most of the last 2,000 years, Christians have been at the forefront of advocating literacy and education for all. Our word “education” is from two Latin terms that mean “to lead people out into their fullest created potential.” Christian giving needs to support this.

Biblical equality means overcoming extreme social disparity. Western missionaries often face this dilemma. Should they live like the nationals with whom they work or should they continue to enjoy western affluence without any change in their lifestyle? It’s a trick question since neither approach is the answer. According to the Willowbank Report on *Gospel and Culture*, it is best to establish a standard of living “which finds it natural to exchange hospitality with others on a basis of reciprocity, without embarrassment.” If we are ashamed to invite people to our home or ashamed to visit others because of our social or economic disparity, something is wrong. As Christians we need to labor to overcome this.

So here is the second principle. In order to practice helpful generosity we need to ask, “Does our giving contribute to equality?”

SCRIPTURE

But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have. ¹⁷For he not only accepted our appeal, but since he is more eager than ever, he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his proclaiming the good news; ¹⁹and not only that, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us while we are administering this generous undertaking for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our goodwill. ²⁰We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift that we are administering, ²¹for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of others. ²²And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found eager in many matters, but who is now more eager than ever because of his great confidence in you. ²³As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you (2 Corinthians 8:16-24 NRSV).

3. IS IT DONE WITH ACCOUNTABILITY?

In order to practice helpful generosity we need to ask, “Is our giving done with accountability?”

Handling money is a risky business and Paul is aware of the dangers. He is determined not only to do right, but to be seen to do right. Paul does not handle the money himself. He entrusts the financial matters to Titus and to two unnamed persons who are highly regarded in all the churches. His point is that Christian giving must be done with accountability.

It works both ways. We are accountable for the resources we have received and accumulated. Givers must honor their commitments and be clear that their gifts are intended for worthwhile and reputable causes. Leaders of such causes must handle gifts with integrity, provide reports with regularity, and follow protocols with transparency.

We can feel good about supporting the work of First Presbyterian Church because we admire the faithfulness of those entrusted with the financial affairs of the congregation. They make sure we have accountability, financial reviews, and general fiscal policies all consistent with the standards set by the Presbyterian Church (USA). In addition, we can also say we are debt free (there are many organizations including churches that cannot make that claim) and we have a healthy reserve. Of course, like all churches, we know the future will present challenges. But with God's help and our faithful stewardship, we can face the future with confidence.

Meanwhile, in order to practice helpful generosity we need to ask, “Is our giving done with accountability?”

CONCLUSION

James Lewis Kraft founded what would eventually be called Kraft Foods (now Kraft Heinz – the fifth largest food company in the world). He once said, “The only investments I ever made which have paid constantly increasing dividends is the money I have given to the Lord.”

Are you willing to invest in the Lord?

In our congregation we provide Estimate of Giving cards in order to communicate a tangible commitment of giving. This process provides a clear goal for the congregation as well as a helpful planning tool for our leadership. This also provides the financial support needed for the life, ministry and mission of the church. Prayerfully consider what kind of commitment God is asking you to make for the coming year. We will be dedicating these commitments next Sunday.

God has been so generous to us. I hope that in response to what God has done for us that you decide to practice generous giving. This involves giving that is proportionate, contributes to equality, and is done with accountability.