

2 Corinthians 9:**Giving Grace**

Our passage this evening gets right to the heart of a very sensitive issue: what we do with our money. This is not something we are used to talking about; for many of us, it is a very private matter – what business is it of anyone else to know either how much we earn, or what we spend our money on?

It is also a subject that is wide open to abuse, and has indeed been deeply abused down through the centuries by all shades of the church. Many a so-called evangelist has made a tidy fortune for himself by drawing on the ideas in this passage.

Yet it is also an unusually topical subject at this time, with the record-smashing donations to the Tsunami relief fund, high-profile donations from Bill Gates towards world health, and this very weekend promises to cancel debt to the poorest nations. There is a lot to make us think about how we use our wealth, both on an individual level, and as a nation.

But we shall see that the thrust of this passage is not about our money as such – but about something much more valuable.

Now it is easy to see how those US TV evangelists can use this passage to their own ends. These are the sort of people who are constantly appealing for money to keep their evangelistic enterprise going. Of course, it does cost a fair sum to run a TV station with all the equipment and staff that requires. But many, if not all, of these evangelists also manage to support an extravagant lifestyle – even by American standards – on the back of these donations.

2 Corinthians 9 seems to give some backing to their appeals for money, though not to their use of it. It is clear that Paul was doing all he could to encourage the Corinthians to make good on a promise they had made to donate funds to help the church in Jerusalem. He was on public record as claiming that they would do so, and had even used their example to spur others on to do the same. Now the time was drawing close to deliver the cash, and from one angle you could say Paul was “sending the boys round” to collect it (9:3)! Further, he was expecting them to give generously to the cause – not just a token sum, but enough that they would feel the pinch.

He encourages them with the thought that if they sow generously, they will reap generously; that God will shower them with blessings, indeed that they will become rich in every way. So it is that these evangelists claim that whatever you give to them, you will receive back many times as much! Some go as far as to claim that people who give to them end up living in bigger houses and driving larger cars than those who give elsewhere (or not at all).

If Paul used various forms of “encouragement” to ensure the Corinthians gave money, these evangelists have developed this to a fine art. I occasionally tune in to their stations during my trips to the States, and hear them pleading with people to give, talking direct to the camera and saying “I know God is speaking direct to some of you, and you have the sum of \$30 in you heart. Don’t resist! Pick up the phone now and pledge the money – but if you give just \$20 more we will send you this free book, ‘God wants you to be rich’”.

There was even a famous case where evangelist Oral Roberts claimed to have received a vision from God that he would be called home to heaven unless he raised \$8m in the next 10 weeks. And sure enough, his gullible audience raised that sum, and he did not die. Personally, I'd think it was worth *paying* that sort of money to get to heaven earlier, but there we go!

Now it is absolutely clear that there is no room for ministers of God's flock to exploit their congregations in this way. It's one thing to draw a living wage from the church; quite another to manipulate giving like that. But one point they make does seem to have support from this passage: that if you give to the church, you will get richer.

To the man in the street, the notion is preposterous. In fact, for many this sort of talk convinces them that the heart of the church is a deception designed to exploit the poor and foolish. For them, the church is just after your money. Maybe today it is to go towards the steeple repair fund rather than the Rector's new Porche, but the church is still interested first and foremost in your cash. And this sort of incentive to get people to give is just another gimmick used to extort money from the vulnerable.

The notion that God showers blessings on those he favours is not a new one, nor should it actually come as a surprise. If God is going to bless anyone, then you would think those he favours would be high on his list. Indeed, in ancient times this was an accepted principle of life – not just for the Jews, but for most of civilisation. You did your best to please your god, and in return he blessed you with a bigger harvest and hence more wealth.

Conversely, if you were going through financial difficulty, then this was a sign that you had lost your god's favour, and the first thing you need to do is to get back into his good books. The whole book of Job addresses this issue. And in so doing exposes it as too simplistic and man-centred to fit the facts.

For a start, there is the problem of how you please God in the first place. Idols of wood and stone might be satisfied with a bit of grovelling and the odd sacrifice, but not so the God of Heaven. To really please him, you have to live a perfect life; which rules us all out.

Anyway, to conclude that God is after your money is to have a pretty low opinion of God – not just in the moral sense, that he should want to extort something from us – but in the glory sense, that he could possibly benefit from any amount of money we could give him.

What possible need does the God who created the universe at a word have for bits of fancy paper or shiny metal? What possible interest does the God who dwells in unapproachable light have in the trappings of worldly wealth?

There is no material thing which we can give to God which could make him any wealthier, any more satisfied, any more glorious than he already is.

Eg the StarTrek film, where supreme being wants to commandeer the Enterprise to travel to another part of the galaxy!

So God does not need our money. It is not possible for him to become richer by making us poorer.

Yet the fact remains that Paul was concerned that the Corinthians should give generously to the church, and that this behaviour is condoned and encouraged by God.

The collection which Paul was raising was not to line his own pockets, nor to make a fortune for other church leaders. Neither was it to erect a massive and glorious church building in Jerusalem or anywhere else.

It was to bring aid the Christians in and around Jerusalem, who were suffering from intense persecution from the Jews. It was, in effect, one of the first recorded international relief projects! Paul was very concerned that this should all be above board, as he makes clear elsewhere in his letter. He was well aware of the potential for things to go badly wrong, for accusations to be made, for people to be tempted by greed. So he entrusted this work to some of his closest friends, such as Titus. Everything was kept in the public arena, so that it would be instantly clear if the gift did not reach its intended recipients.

His desire in this was two-fold. Of course, he wanted to bring relief to his Christian brothers and sisters who were in need; and so, doubtless, he would support the tremendous effort taking place today to bring relief to the Tsunami victims.

To this extent, people ought to see that the church is very much in tune with issues of the day – the very emotion or logic which motivated the British people to give so many millions of pounds to the Tsunami relief, is the same emotion and logic which should always motivate the church. Far from being a relic of a bygone age, living in a way which modern society has long discredited, the church should be at the very vanguard of life in the 21st century. We should be the finest examples of global citizens, concerned for our fellow human beings in the poorest and most disadvantaged circumstances.

But there is more to Christian giving than a compassion for the poor. Paul also wanted to bring glory to God by this gift, by demonstrating to the world as well as within the church that they truly were a people of love. What better motivation for people to give generously than this?

Even moreso, such a demonstration of charity shows not just that we love other people, but that God loves them too. The ultimate motivation to give should be our love for God, and our desire to put that love into practice in the same way he did – by sacrificial giving for the poor and needy.

Now the Tsunami has raised many questions in peoples minds about God. How could a God of love allow such a thing to happen? How could a God who claims to love the poor cause so much devastation amongst the very poorest in these countries?

These are obvious and understandable reactions to such a disaster, especially when the disaster occurred through no fault of man's.

The natural reaction of so many people has been to give to the relief appeal – indeed, many people have volunteered to go and help reconstruction themselves, either with their holidays or, in a lot of cases, by taking a year or two out from their careers. What the church should be doing now is to draw attention to the fact that this is just what God himself would do, and in fact what he has already done.

Far from being the initiator of a disaster which brings suffering to millions, God is the initiator of a relief effort which brings salvation to countless more. It is exactly because we are made in God's image that we care for people on the other side of the globe, in totally different cultures and circumstances to ourselves, and in countries that few of us will ever visit. So I say in response to that question "How could a God of love allow such a thing to happen?", "How can there *not* be a God of Love if you just asked that question?"!

Now we still have to deal with the question of how God rewards those who give. Can it really be true that we end up richer because we give money to the poor? To answer this, we need to draw out from the passage what truly Christian giving is; but first let's note what it is not.

Giving out of a sense of responsibility, or of duty, is not Christian giving. That implies it is something that we ought by some law to do, which in turn implies that it is the right of the people we give to, to receive the gift.

Giving a tithe of our income, whether exactly or more-or-less a 10th, is not Christian giving. This is encouraged in the old testament, but not in the new. There is no magic formula to work out how much we ought to give, though many have found 10% to be a good starting point.

Giving under duress in response to forceful or emotional appeals is not Christian giving. To give reluctantly is to fail to have the needs of the poor at heart; and to need to be manipulated into giving by others also shows a lack of genuine compassion on our part.

Giving in an attempt to alleviate our guilty feelings from having so much when others have so little is not Christian giving. Our motivation should not be for our own psychological benefit, even if that is a by-product.

Giving to offer back to God something in return for what he has given us is also not Christian giving. This one needs careful consideration, for in my own prayers of thanks for the offering, it is often a theme. But we misunderstand the nature of our relationship to God if we think there is anything we can do to repay him for our salvation; and as we saw earlier we fail to appreciate God's glory if we think he has need of our small wealth. That's not to say we are not to be grateful for what he has done for us – far from it! Just that we mustn't think that we are able to repay him in any way, shape or form.

So if these ways are not Christian giving, what is it like? From this passage, we see several valuable principles.

- Firstly, Christian giving is to be **generous** (v5, 6, 11). We are not to be tight-fisted, we are not to be mean or miserly. Of course, there is no formula for generosity – for some people at some stage of life, 10% of their income will be generous; for others, 5% will be, or 50%. That doesn't matter. We all have a good sense of what it means to be generous, and that is what we should do.
- Next, Christian giving must be **heart-felt** (v7). We shouldn't give grudgingly, nor just with cold logic. Our hearts must be in it, for we should love the people we are helping with our gifts. Giving should not be a chore, but a joy.
- Which leads on nicely to the next aspect, which is that we are to be **cheerful** givers. Much of what we spend our money on gives us some pleasure, whether it's the simple pleasure of being warm because we have paid the gas bill, or more obviously in renting a DVD for the evening. When we give money to help others, we should also take some pleasure – because someone else we care for is going to benefit.

- Next, Christian giving is **not** to be under any **compulsion**. Having decided in our heart what to give, we shouldn't be forced to give any more. Remember, God's way of accounting is far different from ours. Seeing someone put a £20 note into the collection might embarrass us into contributing more than the 50p we really wanted to, because we naturally think that £20 is worth more than 50p. But that is not how God sees it. He sees into our hearts, and 50p cheerfully given is a greater gift than £20 given with the wrong motives.
- Christian giving is also Obedient (v 13). The implication here is that there is a command to give, which we are to obey. How then does this sit with the other principle that it is to be heartfelt and not under compulsion? Well, it is possible to be obedient without being compelled. If we had to be forced to obey, then either the rules would be wanting, or you could question our real commitment to the Gospel. We obey because we want to; we want to make Christ our role model and to follow him. And so our giving is both freely given and obedient.

This is Christian giving. So if we give like this, what can we expect in return?

Well, the list is a long one:

- Firstly, in v 6 we can expect to reap generously.
- Next, in v 7 if we give cheerfully we will be loved by God
- Verse 8 is full of superlatives about what God will do for us – “make all grace abound, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work
- Verse 10, we will have an increased store of seed and a harvest of righteousness
- Verse 11, we will be rich in every way
- V 11-13, we will cause others to give thanks and praise to God
- And finally in v14, others will make heartfelt prayers for us.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that God is promising to give us more in return than we give in the first place. We can try to spiritualise the returned blessings, but surely reaping-what-we-sow and being blessed in every way must include financial blessing when we give financially?

Well, if you think financially, if money is what motivates you, then this indeed stands to reason. But the whole thrust of the passage is not about finance; and the seed that God wants us to sow is not money at all.

To understand this more we need to appreciate the Old Testament background that Paul is alluding to. Verse 10 refers back to Isaiah 55:10-11:

⁰ *As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

And Hosea 10:12:

¹² *Sow for yourselves righteousness,
reap the fruit of unfailing love,
and break up your unploughed ground;
for it is time to seek the LORD,
until he comes
and showers righteousness on you.*

The real sowing Paul refers to is the sowing of the Word, the spreading of the Gospel, the witness that we make to Christ when we behave as he wants us to. Sowing like that is bound to create a harvest; and the abundance which God will answer with is an abundance of righteousness.

Now many people have found that they do not lose out financially in the long term, when they regularly give to God. But then, as verse 11 indicates, this just means that they can continue being generous with the extra that they have! What is for sure is that God is neither a debtor nor a fool – so if you set out to prosper materially from the Gospel, then that will be your ruin; but if you seek to give generously, then God will make sure you do not lose out in life, even if that does not mean you get rich in material wealth.

Here is the very heart of the chapter and the very nub of the difficulty we can have in understanding Christian giving. When all is said and done, the amount of money or material possessions we have is not important. These things do not bring happiness in this world, and they are completely irrelevant for the next. If anything, the more we have in this world, the less we will have in the next – because where our treasure is, there will our heart be also (Matthew 6:21).

It does not matter if we give generously and so can't afford some of life's luxuries that the rest of society seems to enjoy. It does not matter whether we are blessed financially or not as a result of our giving. What counts is our relationship to God, and the impact that has on our relationships with one-another. We should be focussing our attention on Him, and seeking to view each situation and need we come across as he does.

There is no doubt that our account with God is totally one sided. We might think that our giving to him, whether of time talent or money, appears on our side of the account. But in fact, as Paul points out several times in chapters 8 and 9, it is only by God's grace that we can give anything in the first place! Even the small amount we give to God, is down to God and not ourselves. Not only does God give back to us much more than we ever give to him, but it is God who enables us to give everything we do give!

The seeming law of cause and effect in sowing and reaping is actually a statement of our entire dependence on God, both for whatever we are able sow, and for whatever we will reap. In his grace, he is able to take what we offer and use it for his purposes – bring blessing to others and glory to his name. And in his grace, he is willing to bless us too, in ways that far exceed anything we can do for him. For when it comes to heart-felt free and generous giving, God himself is our role model. Thanks indeed be to God for his indescribable gift!