

“Joy-Filled Giving”

Introduction: We’re going to take a bit of a side path today, heading down a “scenic vista,” in our journey through the Beatitudes, in order to talk about money. Know that money was right behind the kingdom of God when it came to the favorite topics of Jesus. That’s likely because (picking up where we left off last week) Jesus knows that the pursuit of money will cause our hearts to become divided, and when our hearts are divided, we cannot see God clearly. As Jesus explains later in the Sermon on the Mount, you cannot serve two masters, masters he identifies as God and money (Ma. 6:24).

How might we guard against divided hearts? Somewhat ironically, it’s through giving! It’s through understanding that giving must be a part of our life of faith. And, as we’ll hear the apostle Paul describe it for the church in Corinth, our giving begins not with an amount but with an attitude. Cheerful, thankful, joy-filled giving (giving that cannot wait to get your pledge card in the mail), arises out of hearts that have been overwhelmed by the indescribable gift that is Jesus.

Paul’s financial appeal is found in 2 Cor. 8-9. Let’s hear how he ends this appeal, and then think about how it might be helpful to us. [READ]

I. The Attitude of Giving

A. Paul makes his appeal to the church in Corinth because the church in Jerusalem was in a world of hurt. They’d been suffering from the effects of a famine and were in great need of relief. The Corinthians had begun a collection toward this end the previous year, but due to some internal problems, the collection had stalled. Paul had helped them work through these issues and is now urging them to complete what they had begun. He begins by affirming that they had come a long way:

Since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving (8:7).

Giving, Paul wants the church to know, is not incidental, but integral, to being a follower of Jesus.

Illustration: Church historian Martin Marty tells about a Germanic people group called the Franks who had the practice of baptizing whole armies at a time, immersing the soldiers in lakes or rivers before they did battle. But when baptized, the soldiers would hold their right hand out of the water so it wouldn’t get wet. They thus believed that they could swing their swords and axes freely without troubling their conscience. Marty suggests that the modern counterpart to these weapons might be our checkbooks or debit cards. We hold them “out of the water” thinking that somehow our money is no one else’s business and they we can keep it separate from God’s call on our life.

B. But Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians that giving is not an “extra” to our life of faith, but integral to it, as it directs our hearts. Interestingly, Paul doesn’t give them an amount to put aside; he gives them an attitude to ponder. As we heard him say:

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (9:7).

And the heart work that Paul encourages his readers to do has to do with the work that God, in Christ, has done for them:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (8:9).

Jesus, as we remember in this season, became “poor” by leaving the richness of the heavenly presence of the Father, being born in a barn, wrapped in old cloths and laid in an animal’s feeding trough, living a life of humility and poverty as he walked among us, and ultimately giving up his life so that we might truly and eternally live. This gift that he is, we heard Paul conclude, is indescribable, but it is a gift well worth pondering as we consider our own giving.

## II. An Example of Giving

A. So that his readers know he is not just spouting platitudes, Paul gives them a real-life example - the churches in Macedonia:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity (8:2).

These churches were located in nearby Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Because of their profession that Jesus is Lord (and not the Roman emperor), they had undergone much persecution, part of which was economic; citizens were encouraged to boycott their goods and services. Talk about a recession! Their bank accounts were running on empty. But they refused to stop giving. As Paul goes on to explain:

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us (8:3-5).

B. It’s as if they were standing in line just waiting to give. Now people stand in line for all sorts of reasons: concert tickets, a Black Friday sale, water and food after a hurricane, but standing in line to give? What gives? As Paul explains, “they gave themselves first of all to the Lord,” which means that they had spent time pondering the gift that Jesus was to them and could not imagine not giving back in cheerful, thankful, joyful generosity. Such giving arises out of hearts that have been overwhelmed by the indescribable gift that is Jesus.

## III. The Practice of Giving

A. If that’s the attitude that should lie behind our giving, what practices might accompany it? How should you think about the pledge card you’ll receive by email tomorrow? Here are four practices that come out of this context of joy-filled giving.

1. Be prayerful. Read slowly through chapters 8-9. Ponder what the gift of Jesus has meant for you.
2. Be intentional. Our giving cannot just come out of what is left at the end of the month, or what is left in our wallets or purses when the plate is passed. What can we give God first, right off the top (9:7)?
3. Be trusting. “God is able to bless you abundantly,” Paul writes. Even though it seems we are giving things away, God will provide for us everything that we need. Test him, he offers (9:8; Mal. 3:6-12).
4. Be expectant. God promises to accomplish much through us as we sow generously (9:6).

In this season of giving, may you experience what it means to be a cheerful, thankful, joy-filled giver.