

Cheerful Giving

The problem with success and prosperity is you can never get enough. We not only want to protect



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what we have gained, but we cultivate a mindset of self-satisfaction that smothers selflessness and wonders why others are not willing to work as hard as we have or adopt our successful values and work ethic. If everyone would work hard, take care of their own and believe in God, their problems would be resolved. Of course we want to help the needy; it's just that they should begin to take responsibility for themselves. I have heard these ideas expressed in a thousand conversations, read them often in letters to the editor, and listened to them when I served on the board of a faith-based program focused on hunger issues in our community.

We do not know why the offering in the Corinthian church for those suffering in Jerusalem seems to have lost momentum. But Paul is going to get them back on track. Paul enumerates several reasons he is grateful for Corinth's participation in this offering: their willingness, how their enthusiasm moved the Macedonians to join the effort, and that he knows they will be prepared when he comes to collect their gifts. Paul adds a little incentive by mentioning that neither he nor the Corinthians want the possibility of embarrassment if they fail to follow through. From a Jesus perspective, it is very hard to surrender your life to the Savior who gave himself away for you and then withhold compassion and generosity from those who are suffering.

Paul the theologian is also Paul with a compassionate heart. Corinth was one of the richest cities of that time, but their offering was not to be a celebration of their abundance, even though their resources enabled them to give more. Paul uses the familiar idea that a farmer who sows

generously will harvest a greater crop (v. 6). Giving is always a personal decision: you know your resources and responsibilities. Giving should not be driven by pressure but freely from the heart: "God loves a cheerful giver" (vv. 7-8).

This is the time of year when I give to a local food bank that focuses on children who do not get three meals a day at home. This is also the time of year when my church begins an after-school program for our neighborhood grade school. Our neighborhood is classified as "lower or limited income." These folks are often referred to as the "working poor." I am very pleased to be part of a church that generously gives and actively helps in a truly positive way. We act out of compassion and respect for our neighbors. We are learning every year that "God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work" (v. 8).

The idea of stewardship is prominent throughout the Bible. Everything we possess is a gift from God, to be used wisely and generously. Anyone who has lived outside the United States has seen the stark contrast between our wealth and the world's poverty. As stewards of so much we carry a heavy responsibility to seek God's guidance about how to use our abundance. Paul was very concerned about helping the struggling Jerusalem church, but he also clearly saw the powerful witness of a wealthier "Gentile" church reaching out to the impoverished believers in the "Jewish" church. Different cultures, traditions and heritage, but a common faith in Jesus Christ. In a fragmented world, with long-standing hostilities and prejudices, Paul sees this offering as a vehicle to build trust within the family of faith and show the world what it means to be one in Christ.

The institutional church has too

Formations

September 17, 2017

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

often projected an image of holy separation, judgment and political entanglements. Paul is painting a much different image of God's church: living out thanksgiving to God, honoring God by obedience to Christ above all else, generously sharing with those in need, praying for others and caring deeply about others because of God's grace (vv. 13-15). The New Testament knows nothing about a church embracing government, copying the structures of the world's wealth and power, or compromising integrity for cultural fashion and success. The church of Paul's day lived in a world that saw them as strange and even dangerous. Those "little Christs" would not worship an emperor or accept fashionable immorality. They were strange in their acceptance of all who professed faith in Christ. They climbed over racial and cultural barriers. They were strangely moral. They ignored class distinctions. And a wealthy church in a leading Gentile city sent money to a struggling congregation in the capitol city of Judaism because they were all within the family called Christian. What could motivate such different people to erase long-established barriers?

We might ask ourselves that same question. Why do we go to the far places of the world when we live in the best place? Why do we feed strangers, build houses for those who are different, travel to disaster sites to rebuild hospitals and homes and give generously without asking the recipients if they believe like us or will join our church? Christian giving is a strange business – until you understand how generous God has been in sending his Son to be one with us, even to the point of death! Cheerful giving is a matter of what's in your heart.

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