

# Giving of Oneself

Years ago I knew the pastor of what was then reported to be the second largest Baptist church in Texas.



**Michael K. Olmsted** Every September was “stewardship month” and the pastor preached about giving every Sunday. Worship attendance dropped in September. The budget was pledged. The pastor commented: “They may not want to hear sermons about tithing but their checks keep coming in!”

Christian stewardship is about much more than reaching a campaign goal or sending money to some far-off place where strange people live in mud huts. Paul lists the gift of generosity or giving as a “work of grace” along with “faith, speech, knowledge, total commitment, and the love we inspired in you” (v. 7). Our lesson is appropriately titled, “Giving Oneself” because our heart, as well as wallet, should offer relief and help to those who face overwhelming challenges.

There is an obvious contrast between the circumstances of the original church in Jerusalem and the missionary church in Corinth. The Jerusalem church was composed of Jewish converts, with many widows without necessary resources (Acts 6:1-7). The Corinthian church included a mixture of Jewish and Gentile converts, but it was located in one of Greece’s richest cities and did not face the degree of enmity from local government as did the church in Jerusalem.

As Paul traveled the empire preaching the good news he also sought help from these new churches for those in need in Jerusalem. In Galatians, Paul mentions his meeting with Peter, James and John who were leaders of the Jerusalem church. Those leaders respected Paul as a missionary to the greater Roman world and asked him to remember their poor (Gal. 2:8-10). Paul was mindful that churches across the empire might have different cultural contexts but they must all be one in Christ and share concern for one another.

We don’t know why there was a lull in Corinth’s fundraising for

Jerusalem, but Paul is calling on Titus to “finish this work of grace with you (Corinth) the way he had started it” (v. 6). The churches of Macedonia are celebrated for their “being tested by many problems, their extra amount of happiness and their extreme poverty resulted in a surplus of rich generosity” (v. 2). Those churches voluntarily gave “more than they could afford” (v. 3).

The secret to Macedonia’s generosity in their Jerusalem offering is “they gave themselves to the Lord first and to us, consistent with God’s will” (v. 5). This generosity is more than a response to a photo of a hungry child, more than an appeal to send Christmas boxes to children in Africa and more than an effort to erase personal guilt. This is a matter of being part of God’s family, supporting brothers and sisters and partnering with a church located in a place where the grace of God is acted out every day. In a world where size and programs are touted as spiritual success, we are presented the effectiveness and power of God’s grace in the face of opposition and poverty. Paul is urging the Corinthian church to see beyond its comfort and become part of God’s work in a distant place.

If Macedonia can do this, then why can’t Corinth with their greater resources? Is Paul using a shame tactic? Not really. He knows the heart of Corinth, but he wants the rest of the Christian family to see and be inspired by their authentic Christian love (v. 8). There is an appeal to foundational beliefs: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sake, so that you could become rich through his poverty” (v. 9). Wealth and poverty are defined here in a way that reverses human thinking. When we become followers of Christ our thinking and values are radicalized.

I know a man who went from poverty in his youth to amazing business success. He has given away millions of dollars (quietly) and explained, “I have never known greater joy than to see a shattered life made completely new by God’s love, and nobody knew where the funds came from!” In the Corinthian case, there

## Formations

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Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

was no need for anonymity – this was an opportunity to simply join God in what he was doing in their world.

Paul reminds them they started this job with enthusiasm a year earlier. It’s time to renew their enthusiasm and give. He notes there is no point in counting the dollar amounts or figuring out who can afford what: the bottom line is to give “willingly” (v. 12). Paul is very practical! This idea of sharing gladly what God has entrusted to you balances out. Today your surplus provides for their need; tomorrow their surplus will provide for your need (v. 14). This is more than equality, this is God’s gracious way. Paul reaches back to the saga of Israel’s wilderness journey when God provided manna each day and every family had all they needed, whether they collected more or less (Exodus 16:15-18).

If we talk about grace as God’s people then we need to live out that grace. Paul was encouraging the Corinthian Christians to use their resources as God’s gift to them, a gift to be shared, a gift of love. Madge Thornell Roberts writes about Texas hero and governor Sam Houston, who was baptized later in life. When the pastor told Houston his sins were now washed away, Houston dryly replied, “God help the fish!” Later Houston said his pocketbook must have been baptized that day as well, and he agreed to pay half the pastor’s salary!

Knowing how much Jesus has given us (who really understands the price of the cross), we can be generous with our ministries to a lost and suffering world. From the moment we accept Jesus’ gift of life we begin to learn the meaning of grace. The more we open our life to God and care about others, the more we are filled with God’s love. We are part of a family that stretches from Corinth to Jerusalem and around the world. In our giving as a child of God we will also be a recipient.

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