

Dear Hills Church,

Our lesson for this week is taken from the 9th chapter of Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth. It is 2 Corinthians 9:6-11a.

Here is the passage from the NRSV:

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity which will produce thanksgiving to God through us."

And from the Message

Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.

God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,

He throws caution to the winds,
giving to the needy in reckless abandon.
His right-living, right-giving ways
never run out, never wear out.

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.

Paul's efforts to raise funds are both profoundly theological and profoundly practical. In the years immediately following Jesus' death the early Christians

split into two opposing camps. The church in Jerusalem felt that Christianity was and should continue to be a Jewish renewal movement. Jesus himself made comments that could lead one to believe he understood his mission to be primarily (even exclusively) for Jews. The church in Jerusalem, led by Jesus' brother James and the apostle Peter did not feel that outreach to gentiles should be a priority.

Meanwhile, the apostle Paul (who was also Jewish), who never met the historical Jesus, had a vision in which he experienced the risen Christ and was called to bring the gospel to all people. After negotiating with Peter and James, Paul agreed that he would take the gospel to the world and begin planting churches throughout the ancient near east, reaching out to both Jews and gentiles. Meanwhile, the Jerusalem church would continue to focus on the Jewish people.

Because Peter, James and their people had sold all their property and either given it to the poor or shared it with each other (as suggested and taught by Jesus) they were in poverty. It is also possible to read the New Testament as suggesting that there were very serious tensions between Paul and the Jerusalem church. For both of these reasons, because he was moved by their plight, their poverty, and because he recognized their authority and connection to Jesus and wanted to connect his gentile/Jewish churches with Christ's original followers, Paul began to raise money from his new churches to send back to the Jerusalem church. It was both an "outreach" effort and an attempt to hold the early church together before it had a chance to come apart. This is the historical context behind the plea he makes in this week's lesson.

On a theological level Paul wants to make a distinction between giving out of obligation and giving out of love. A distinction between giving out of duty and giving out of joy. A distinction between giving out of guilt and giving out of gladness. He says, "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Why does God love a cheerful giver more than an obligated one?

This is the sort of question and contrast that the Protestant Reformers seized upon 1,500 years later when developing the doctrines that are the bedrock of our Christianity. Following Paul, Martin Luther argued that we do good because God has been good to us. First God accepts us and loves us in Christ Jesus and then our lives are changed. We don't change our lives in order to be loved by God. We live righteously because God has treated us as if we were already righteous. This is in contrast to the Roman Catholic doctrines of the time which held that a person lives a moral life in order to be pleasing to God. Luther said "no" to this idea. He believed that we all sin and are all, therefore, incapable of being perfectly pleasing to God. Even if we wanted to earn God's love we would be unable to do so. We can't help but tell lies, look to our own interests first, love other things (even "good" things like family and nation) as much or

more than we love God. In each of these cases we break a commandment and fail to earn God's mercy.

Yet God is merciful anyhow. As a result and in response to the unearned and undeserved gift of grace, we are motivated, inspired, moved, to be better than we were before. We are transformed by the gift we've been given and we will try and live morally in response. Not to earn God's love, but because God's love has been given to us precisely when we didn't deserve it. We try to live morally because we're joyful at the fact of God's love. We don't live morally in order to earn that love.

So, Paul says, in effect, "I don't want you to give to our church and our poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem because you are under compulsion. I want you to give because God loves you and because you're inspired to be generous in response. God wants you to give cheerfully and to live cheerfully."

Can you think of a time in your own life when you've given an unearned gift to someone and seen them change for the better as a result of your kindness?

Can you think of a time in your life when you've received an unearned gift and been motivated to be more generous or more loving as a result? In this instance think beyond material gifts and consider things like love that you didn't earn or acceptance that was freely given.

When you stop and consider why you try to do the good, does your relationship to God play a role in your ethical decisions? Is the distinction between doing good in order to be in right relationship with God versus doing good because Christ has put you in right relationship with God still powerful, or is a debate best left in the 15th century?

What does all of this have to do with your decisions regarding our Hills Church Stewardship campaign? We'll consider some of these questions on Sunday. And we'll hear a story about a man who gave away fifty million dollars to the poor and then gave away one of his kidneys to a terminally ill stranger. If he didn't do so with joy in his heart was God pleased at his generosity? It should be a fun Sunday morning.