

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Wisely Handles Wealth***

#### **Good Reasons for Giving**

2 Corinthians 8, 9

Giving is the essence of our Christian faith. The Bible says, “For God so loved the world, *that he gave...*” We are called to give of our time. We are called to give of our talents. We are called to give ourselves. And in giving ourselves, we are called to give of our possessions, specifically our money.

Did you know that twice as many verses in the Bible are devoted to money than to prayer and faith combined? There are about 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but over 2000 verses that speak on money and possessions! No wonder Jesus spoke so much about money. More than half of the thirty plus parables that Jesus told speak of stewardship of our money and possessions. Of all of Jesus’ words, a full 15% are devoted to the subject of money. Amazingly, Jesus said more about money and possessions than about heaven and hell. Giving is at the heart of our biblical faith.

When you take all that the Bible has to say about giving and ask the question, “Why should I give?” – you basically come up with three answers, all of which are found in 2 Corinthians 8, 9. The first one is this:

#### ***My Giving Expresses My Thankfulness to God.***

The Bible says that our primary motivation in giving is the *grace of God*. In fact, the words “gift,” “thanks” and “grace” all come from the same word in the language of the New Testament. Giving is not about high-pressure appeals, obligation, sob stories or a sense of duty. It *is* all about grace. Giving springs from grace, is characterized by grace and results in grace (“thanks”). From beginning to end giving is a matter of grace! For where *grace inflows*, *giving outflows*!!

Paul highlights this point in his introduction to the topic of giving in 2 Corinthians 8. The word “grace” is used four times just in these first 8 verses. Notice what Paul says beginning in verse 1:

Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his *kindness* [*grace*] has done through the churches in Macedonia. NLT

And again in verse 4: “They begged us again and again for the *privilege* [*grace*] of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem.” And then again in verse 6: “...So we urged Titus...to return to you and encourage you to finish this *ministry of giving* [*grace*].” And finally in verse 7: “...I want you to excel also in this *gracious act* [*grace*] of giving.”

Beyond that, grace is mentioned three more times in chapter 8 and then three more times in chapter 9. And then Paul crescendos to the grand finale in chapter 9, verse 15: “*Thanks* [*grace*] be unto God for his gift too wonderful for words!” Giving is all about grace!

Unfortunately, because of the twisted patterns of sin, we are often influenced by the law of *reverse proportion*. What is that? Martin Luther in his little book *Table Talk* describes it this way: “The greater God’s gifts and works, the less they are regarded.” Put in other terms, *we often exhibit a degree of thanksgiving in life in reverse proportion to the amount of blessings we have received.*<sup>i</sup>

I was reminded of this during our visit to Rwanda last summer. A lonely, orphaned child with no place to call home is more thankful for a cheap dime-store gift than our own children are for an expensive Nintendo DS Playstation. A North Korean believer who finally gets his own copy of the Bible is more thankful than you and I are for all Christian books and literature that overflow our shelves. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that if the constellations appeared only once in a thousand years, imagine what a celebratory event it would be! But because they’re there every night, we rarely notice their beauty.

I have a hunch that this tragic principle was at work when we compare the giving of the Macedonian believers to that of the Corinthian church. The Macedonian believers had next to nothing; the Corinthian believers seemed to have all they needed. But notice how Paul describes the Macedonian believers beginning in chapter 8, verse 2:

They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem.

These believers in Macedonia were the poorest of the poor. One translation speaks of their “deep” poverty (NASB). From this Greek word we get our word “bathysphere,” which is a vessel that descends to the very bottom of the ocean for exploratory purposes. In other words, these folk were “down-to-the-depth” poor or rock-bottom poor. They probably shopped at the bargain marts (if they could shop at all!), lived off of food stamps and anxiously awaited their next welfare check. And this is probably why the Apostle uses these Christians as an example of sacrificial giving. Why? Because their giving was not tainted by this *law of reverse proportion*.

Here’s the principle: **When we are truly thankful, our perceived poverty is not a liability but an opportunity for generosity.**

In the book *Tortured for Christ*, Richard Wurmbrand tells of his many years in and out of miserable Communist prisons because of his faith in Christ. He was often tortured, and on some occasions nearly starved to death. But the principle of sacrificial giving was so internalized in his heart that when he was given one slice of bread a week and dirty soup every day, he faithfully tithed from it. Every tenth day he gave his soup to a weaker brother, and every tenth week he took his slice of bread and gave it to one of his fellow prisoners in Jesus’ name.<sup>ii</sup>

In fact, it is often the case that those who have less proportionately give more than those who have much. Why? The *law of reverse proportion*. We tend to exhibit a degree of thanksgiving in life in reverse proportion to the amount of blessings we have received.

However, one sure sign of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a reversal of this twisted pattern. The law of reverse proportion is gradually transformed into the experience of proper proportion by which we express thankfulness in proportion to what we have received.

### ***My Giving Clarifies My Commitment to God.***

Why should I give? First, it helps me express my thankfulness to God for his past blessings. But more than that, it helps me clarify my values and priorities in the present.

Here's the principle: What you do with even a small amount of *material wealth* is a dependable barometer of your *spiritual health*. The material wealth that we do have is God's "litmus test" of whether or not to entrust us with the true riches of spiritual responsibility in this life and eternal reward in the next.

This is what Paul is saying when he writes to the Corinthians in chapter 8, verses 7-8:

Since you excel in so many ways – in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love for us – I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving. I am not commanding you to do this. *But I am testing how genuine your love is ...*" 2 Corinthians 8:7-8 NLT

If Paul were writing to Central Bible Church today, he might say, "You at CB, you excel in many ways. You have a love for God and his Word, you send missionaries to more than 35 countries around the world, you love children and welcome various nationalities...but I also want you to excel in this area of giving."

Just like any other area of the Christian life, we can *grow* in our giving. And our growth in giving is one of the signs of our growth in commitment. That's why Paul says, "I am not commanding you to do this [that is, to give]. *But I am testing how genuine your love is...*"

*Stewardship is lordship.* It all comes down to who is lord of your life. Paul points this out to the Corinthians as he refers again to the example of the Macedonians:

"They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do."  
2 Corinthians 8:5 NLT

Stewardship is lordship. God can have our money without having our hearts, but He can't truly have our hearts without having our money! God really doesn't want your money. He wants what your money represents – your life.

When I sit down and write out that check for God's work, it reminds me of two things: First, all I have belongs to God. The first step in being smart with money and possessions is to recognize that you really don't have any to start with. It all belongs to God. We as servants are simply caretakers of what has been entrusted to us. Ultimately, it all belongs to God.

The story is told of an anxious man who rode his horse up to John Wesley and shouted "Mr. Wesley, something terrible has happened. Your house has burned to the ground!" Weighing the

news for a minute, John Wesley replied, “No. The *Lord’s* house burned to the ground. That means one less responsibility for me.” Isn’t that freeing?

The second thing my giving reminds me of is that I am simply a manager – a steward – of what God has temporarily entrusted to me. Quite frankly, under the New Testament principle of grace, it is not so much a question of how much of *our* money we should give to God, but rather how much of *God’s* money we should keep for ourselves.

What should our giving commitment in the present look like? The Bible is very clear. Our giving should be *planned*. That is, it should be intentional. Paul says in chapter 9, verse 7: “You must each decide in your heart how much to give.” Is your giving planned? Have you decided before God in your heart what He is calling you to give?

Last week we gave you a little card “Between me and God.” This is intended to help you think through what your giving commitment is to God’s work through the local church. I find that many Christians don’t like to make commitments. It always amazes me how we can make commitments in so many areas of life – in marriage, in our work, in our taxes, with our credit cards. We make a commitment to pay our monthly mortgage. But when it comes to clarifying our commitment to God and to his local church, we are hesitant. We reason, “Why I can’t commit to a local church, because I don’t know where I’ll be next year.” Or “I can’t commit to giving a certain amount to God’s work. After all, the economy is so unstable.” The Bible says that our giving should be planned, intentional. “You must decide in your heart how much to give.”

Not only should our giving commitment be planned. It should be *regular*. Paul writes this to the Corinthians:

“On the first day of each week you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. Don’t wait until I get there and then try to collect it all at once” (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Well, the Corinthians got off to a good start. They apparently were giving regularly, but then their good intentions fell to wayside. That’s why Paul writes about a year later and says, “Follow-through on your commitment!” Here’s what he says in 2 Corinthians 8:10 –

Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started a year ago. Last year you were the first who wanted to give, and you were the first to begin doing it. Now you should finish what you started.

Maybe you need that encouragement in your giving: *be regular*. How often we say we are willing, and we show great enthusiasm, but the “doing” is not there. Follow-through.

Thirdly, our giving commitment should be *proportionate*. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:11 “Give in proportion to what you have.” The money God allows us to manage has basically two purposes: (1) provide for the needs of our family (1 Timothy ); and (2) invest in the work of God. And this is where each of us must evaluate our present level of commitment.

How did these believers give “in proportion” to what they had? I believe they started with the biblical principle of the tithe. Some may ask: “But what if I don’t have anything to give?” Maybe you have no income. Maybe you’ve been laid off work. Or maybe your present income is not enough to meet your daily needs. Or maybe you’re in debt. What then? Well, the next reason for giving my help in answering that question.

My giving expresses my thankfulness to God. My giving expresses my commitment to God. But thirdly,

### ***My Giving Demonstrates My Faith in God.***

Giving is not just about thankfulness and commitment. It’s about faith in God’s provision in the present and reward in the future.

Remember the key question of last week: Does your giving express God’s willingness to bless? That comes from Malachi 3:10 –

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough good in my Temple. If you do,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! *Try it! Put me to the test!*”

Does your giving express God’s willingness to bless? No matter what your income level is – whether you have an abundance or whether you’re in debt – is your giving an expression of your naked faith in God’s character?

Testing God is *always* viewed in a negative light in the Bible. We are often told to trust God, but *never* to test God...except here! When it comes to our fiancés and God’s faithful provision in our lives, we are to *put Him to the test*.

Paul picks up on this in 2 Corinthians 9:6 putting it in agricultural terms:

Remember this – a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop

This is not an emotional appeal, but a very logical one. Every farmer knows that before he can receive, he must first give. If he wants to harvest a bountiful crop of corn, he must give many good seeds to the ground. In our modern days, we use huge planters and combines in order to increase the potential for sowing and consequently the potential for harvesting.

What is valid in the agricultural realm is also valid in the spiritual realm. This same principle is stated elsewhere in Scripture: Proverbs 11:24 says, “*One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.*”

Again, Paul says the same thing in verse 8 of chapter 9: *And God will generously provide all you need* (NLT). More literally verse 8 begins with three extremely important words: “*God is able.*” Literally, the Greek text reads this way, “*able is God!*” What is Paul saying? As we look at our own resources, at our income, at our means, at our needs, we cry out “inability!” But as we look

at God's grace, at God's promises, at God's provision we cry out "ability!"..."*able is God!*" In other words, God's ability can triumph over our inability! As we relieve others, we receive ourselves. And so giving is not "self-impooverishment, but self-enrichment."<sup>iii</sup> God not only promises to meet our material needs, but also to satisfy our souls.

God's Word, however, promises us not only God's provision in the present, but God's reward in the future. In the investment world there are experts and advisors known as "market timers." When they read the signs that the stock market is about to take a downward turn, they recommend switching funds immediately into more dependable or consistent investments, such as money markets or certificates of deposit. The Bible is our foremost "market timer" or investment advisor. God's Word is the ultimate expert in the economies of earth and heaven. The strategy is simple, requiring no background in economics to understand it. It tells us to switch investment vehicles. It tells you and me to transfer our funds from earth which is coming to an end, to heaven which will never end. When you focus on financial yields in this life, you will always be headed *away* from your treasure. When you focus on high yields in heaven, you will always be headed *toward* your treasure.<sup>iv</sup>

Not long ago Ann Landers had an interesting letter in her column. It was from a girl who was writing about her uncle & aunt. She said, "My uncle was the tightest man I've ever known. All his life, every time he got paid he took \$20 out of his paycheck & put it under his mattress. Then he got sick & was about to die. As he was dying, he said to his wife, "I want you to promise me one thing." "Promise what?" she asked. "I want you to promise me that when I'm dead you'll take my money from under the mattress & put it in my casket so that I can take it all with me." The girl's letter went on with the story. "He died, & his wife kept her promise. She went in & got all that money the day he died & went to the bank & deposited it, & wrote out a check & put it in his casket."

As someone has said, "Do your given while your liven', then you kowin where it's goin." And we are motivated to do just that when we our giving expresses our thankfulness, reveals our commitment and demonstrates our faith in a God who provides in the present and rewards in the future.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For these thoughts I'm indebted to Robert J. Morgon, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustration, Quotes*, 736.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations, Quotes*, p 343.

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen Olford

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, 129.