

God-Shaped Generosity

2 Corinthians 8-9

So we come to the last of this brief series of sermons on stewardship (in today's language, 'resource management'). The first topic scheduled, though not preached, was the role of church leadership as stewards of God's church. The second, our stewardship of the ministry skills and abilities God gives us. The third, last week, stewardship of each other, particularly of those who fall away from faith or into sin. Now, lastly, stewardship of the finances that God generously provides us.

Money was apparently as sensitive a topic in the first century as in the twenty-first. One of Paul's purposes in writing 2 Corinthians was to remind the church there to take up an offering for the famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem, a thousand miles and three months' journey away. The apostle offers so many reasons in such short space that they follow one another at breakneck pace. In the end, there are far too many to give each one individual attention in six readings, so the notes below often combine two reasons in one reflection.

Day 1: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7 Generosity is a basic practice of Christian living

Paul actually develops two reasons here. First, he invokes peer pressure, quoting the example of the church in the neighboring district to the north (8:1-5). Despite painful poverty, the Macedonians were so passionate for God, and so concerned about their Christian brothers in Jerusalem, that they begged Paul to take their contributions. After making his point through the Macedonian case study, Paul then states it directly. The Corinthians are so proud of their spiritual endowments – their faith, their speech, their wisdom – but there is one more essential evidence of God's grace in a human life that they still lack: generosity. Both from the Macedonian case study, and from Paul's direct assertion, we learn that generosity – and passionate concern for God's people in need – is a normal accompaniment of passion for God.

So the question that naturally arises for each of us is: If our passion for God is measured by our generosity toward Christians in need, how much do we actually love him?

Day 2: 2 Corinthians 8:9 Christ was generous to us

While the Macedonians provide a useful case study, the most persuasive argument for sacrificial generosity comes from the life and death of Christ. Paul describes the incarnation and crucifixion in financial terms: though the heavenly Christ was rich with glory, yet for our sakes he suffered the ignominy of incarnation and the barbarity of execution, so that through his

impoverishment, we might become rich with divine blessing. So Christ provides two motivations to generosity: (a) the impoverishment he embraced for our sakes; and, (b) the extraordinary wealth we receive from him.

This makes the strongest possible case for generous giving. As we turn to Jesus in prayer, as we worship, as we thank him for our salvation, we daily face the reminder that he gave up his wealth to become poor for us, that we might become rich in him. His establishes the model for us in responding to Christian brothers and sisters in financial need, whether locally or internationally. More than that, as he not only dies for us, but lives in us, he transforms us so that we live like him.

Day 3: 2 Corinthians 8:10-15 God values their generosity, even if they do not have much to give. The ancient world – like ours – naturally tended to value large benefactions and their benefactors: what mattered was the amount given, and so the wealthy could make a big show of generosity while still retaining a great portion of their wealth. (Not unlike the wealthiest billionaires today.) But Jesus commended the widow who gave her last two pennies to the work of God over the wealthy who gave great sums out of their surplus. Following his master, Paul likewise affirms that it is not the dollar amount which God notices (8:10-12). God measures generosity not in terms of the amount given, but in terms of the amount retained for personal use. So by this measure, even the poorest among us can receive God's commendation.

Beyond the amount we retain for ourselves, the other measure of generosity is our wealth relative to the need. Paul assures the Corinthians that he is not trying to bankrupt them. He seeks only to level the playing field (8:13-15). Currently, they may not be wealthy, but they have more than they absolutely need, while the believers in Jerusalem face famine. So he calls for equity.

In one sense, it is hard to understand how far to apply this text today. As Americans, most of us enjoy an unrivaled standard of living, especially when compared to Christians in developing countries (let alone, Christians in countries facing famine, as the Jerusalem church was). Few of us will ever be so generous as to make a dent in this inequity, either by lowering our own standard of living, or by raising the recipients' of our donations. But in a more important sense, while we may not know how far to go, and likely will never fulfill the standard Paul lays down in this text, we can, at least, make a start through giving generous enough at least to deprive us from some luxuries or extravagances that we would otherwise enjoy.

Day 4: 2 Corinthians 8:16-24 Generosity deserves careful oversight

Well-meaning and generous donations can inadvertently do a lot of harm. Sometimes they prove too strong a temptation, and breed corruption among middle-men, even in the case of Christian organizations. For example, a seminary student from Ghana once reported to me that in his homeland, the local Christians employed by an international Christian aid agency lived in luxury apartments. Other times donations breed dependency, as in the case of churches which suppose that since their pastor receives support from Christians overseas, they no longer need to give to the church to support him. Worse still, sometimes the funds never make it overseas due to inefficiency and high overheads, or due to greed and corruption on the part of the fund-raising agency and its leadership.

Paul is sensitive to legitimate concerns for accountability, and also to the suspicions that often arise when church leaders handle large sums of money. So, as he urges donations for the church in Jerusalem, he is careful to ensure – and to assure the Corinthians – that strict oversight is in place. He will handle none of the money. Titus will collect the funds from them, but he will not travel alone. Another brother, one attested and respected among several churches, will accompany him. And a third, proven co-worker will join them.

Similarly, today, Christians do well to ensure that their charity donations have proper oversight, and that has never been easier to assess. Several on-line databases track fund-raising expenses and effectiveness. For further details, see <http://philanthropy.com/blogs/giveandtake/five-charity-evaluation-groups-mount-effort-to-educate-americans-about-smarter-giving/10344> or <http://www.tacticalphilanthropy.com/2011/01/how-to-evaluate-a-charity> (thanks to Beata for the references).

Day 5: 2 Corinthians 9:1-7 Generosity brings pleasure to God

Again, this reading combines two distinct points that Paul is making. First, in 9:1-5, Paul takes pragmatic steps to ensure that their gift is not grudging, but generous and joyful. Toward this end, he sends emissaries ahead, to prepare the collection and contribution, so that when he arrives, accompanied by generous Christians from the Macedonian churches, no one is embarrassed by any short-fall, or by a perceived reluctance to donate.

Then, secondly, to motivate generosity, Paul lays down two principles of giving. For one, those who give generously also receive generously (9:6). This is not a law of karma, secondly; it is because God loves – and rewards – cheerful givers (9:7). So, Paul urges them, and us, to give only what we decide under our own volition, not under a sense of obligation or with reluctance. At the same time,

he notes that generous and cheerful giving is one way we bring God pleasure.

This is entirely surprising: God lacks nothing, and if he did, certainly we could not provide it. Nonetheless, we can give him pleasure, just as when we take our spouse to a favorite restaurant, or give a thoughtful gift to a friend. We have the same effect on God, when we give generously and cheerfully. The obvious question for us, then, is not only how much we give, but also how happily we give. Are we grateful for the spare funds? Do we treasure the opportunity to be a channel through which God blesses others? Or, does money need to be prised out of our tightly clenched fists?

Day 6: 2 Corinthians 9:8-15 Generosity brings glory to God

In these few verses, Paul offers another three reasons for the Corinthians to give generously. All three relate to the worship of God. The Corinthians should be generous, first, because doing so will prompt them to worship God; secondly, because their generosity is itself an act of priestly worship; and, thirdly, because their generosity will also prompt others to worship.

Corinthian generosity will prompt them to worship God (9:8-11). As they give, God will supply all their needs: their need for transforming grace that prompts generosity in the first place, their need for sufficient wealth to be able to give generously, and their need to be productive in ministry. God will make them rich “in every way”, as they give generously to the collection, and so they will enjoy and celebrate the goodness of God.

Secondly, a point missed in the NIV translation of verse 12, Paul refers to the Corinthian offering as a service (from the word for ‘deacon’) of sacrifice (from the word for ‘the role of priests in offering an animal sacrifice’). When they give generously and cheerfully, they serve as priests (just as when Old Testament priests offered animal sacrifices, or when Paul preached the gospel to gentiles, Romans 15:16).

Thirdly, their generosity will also prompt the recipients to worship God (9:12-15). Their gifts will not only meet human need, it will overflow in gratitude toward God who rescues from financial plight, and who works in the hearts of his people to prompt generosity. The recipients will worship God, and celebrate the generosity of their donors.

The contemporary parallels are direct. As we give sacrificially, God receives worship. We worship him for the opportunity to give; we worship him as we give; and the recipients worship him for what we give. Let us worship God with the enthusiasm – and the generosity – that he deserves!