

February 12, 2012

Sermon Overview:

For the last 3 weeks we have been looking at how the Gospel relates to wealth and possessions. We have seen the connection between money and our hearts and even how money can easily become a rival to God as we put our love and trust in it. This week, we touched on how we should actually use our money—how giving functions in God’s economy.

The Context of Giving: To have a correct understand of giving, one must set it within the context of creation and covenant. Creation reminds us that everything we have is a gift from God, and even the things God gives us, he still owns. Thus we are to see ourselves as God’s money-managers, accountable to God for how we use his money. If we are not investing God’s money in a way that is in keeping with his values and goals, and that includes our giving, then we are committing cosmic fraud, robbing him (Mal 3:8).

But God not only relates to us as creator, he relates to his people as redeemer. Which is why giving is equated with returning to God (3:7, 10). Giving is thus an expression of a relationship. The giving and receiving of gifts is what binds relationships together. God promises that if we pursue him in generosity, he will reciprocate (3:10).

Practical Principles about Giving: Verse 10 instructs the people to “*bring the tithe into the storehouse that there may be food for God’s house.*” This hints at the practical purpose of giving. From texts like Deut 14 and Num 18, it becomes clear that God desired for his people’s giving to go toward three purposes. First, money was given to support those who staff the sanctuary (Num 18:21). Second, the money was also given for the resources used in worship (Deut 14: 22–23; Mal 3:10). Third, a portion of the people’s giving was to be used for diaconal needs, for “the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow” (Deut 14:29). Moreover, there is a local priority to the giving: you are to make sure you take care of the one “*who is within your town*” (vv27, 29).

Of course, at some point the question is asked: How much are we supposed to give? And the only standard the Bible gives is the tithe. A baseline (not a ceiling) that God required of all Israelites was a tenth of their annual income. Christians have puzzled over the fact that the New Testament is relatively ambiguous about the tithe. While Jesus clearly affirms it for those under the old dispensation (Matt 23:23), there is no explicit reiteration of it for his disciples. Why is that? Perhaps the best answer is that without abrogating the tithe, the New Testament reveals a far more powerful calculator for giving: The cross of Christ. Thus, Tim Keller says: “when you consider how much to give, don’t sit down with the calculator, sit down with the cross.”

The Motivation for Giving: If the cross is the paradigm for Christian giving, then we have a tall order on our hands. Where does one get the motivation for such sacrificial giving? Paul shows us in 2 Cor 8–9, where he motivates not with guilt, nor willpower, but with grace—our gratitude for grace and our participation in grace. Paul has been urging the Corinthians to give to the needy Church in Jerusalem. And the key verse in his appeal is 8:9: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.* What is to motivate the Corinthian giving is their experience of the grace of God. But Paul wants this experience to be worked out in their lives, as they participate in God’s generosity. And so he urges them to give, because he knows that God’s grace flows to people through people. Thus God intentionally gives his people the opportunity to give, because in giving they get to participate in, by being a conduit of, God’s grace.

Questions for Discussion:

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. Did your parents ever give you money to put into the offering? What impact did that have on you?

Looking at the Bible:

1. In the Old Testament, tithes were given for the upkeep of the sanctuary, for those in full time ministry, and for the poor. Priority was also given to local ministry (see Num 18; Deut 14:22-29; Neh 13:10-14).
 - a. What practical implications might this have for our giving today?
 - b. Read 2 Chr 31:4-10. Jesus says that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Lk 12:34). What did the people's giving say about their heart?
2. Read 2 Cor 8:1-15: When Paul encourages the Corinthians to give to the needy church in Jerusalem, he doesn't say, "For you know the tithe commandment," but "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v9)
 - a. Why might that be significant?
 - b. What practical difference would that make in the Corinthians' contribution?
 - c. Is it ever appropriate for believers to give less than a tithe/tenth? Why or why not?
3. Commenting on 2 Cor 8:9, John Barclay says that believers have been made rich "so that, like Christ and in Christ, they might utilize that "richness" in self-giving for others."
 - a. List the ways that you can see this dynamic at work in 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 and 9:6-15.
 - b. What practical implication does this have for those with a surplus?
 - c. From 2 Cor 8:14-15, what might we conclude about how God supplies believers' needs?

Looking at our Hearts

4. 2 Cor 8:9 says that our giving should reflect our knowledge (practical experience) of God's grace.
 - a. What would a person's giving need to look like in order for someone to ask: What does he/she know that I don't know that makes them invest their money there?
 - b. As a group, reflect on this statement: if your giving doesn't make your eye's pop, it probably won't make someone else's eyes pop either.
 - c. Spend some time reflecting on your giving patterns in light of your experience of God's grace.
5. What primarily motivates your giving?
 - a. What practical difference would it make if you saw giving as the expression of a relationship and not a legalistic box to check?
 - b. What does it look like to be motivated by gratitude for and participation in grace?

Praying for Each Other (*Use these suggestions to help focus your time in prayer together*).

- Pray that we might know the grace of God in our giving practices.
- Pray that those who have a surplus would be actively looking to supply the needs of others.