

This has been an amazing week for me. First, I was pre-selected to receive my bank's "very best credit card." Then I got a phone call telling me I had won 3.5 million dollars and a new Mercedes Benz. It was a good thing I had access to all that money so I could help a member of our church...Ever been scammed like that?

It seems like everyone has a good idea of what to do with MY money. I resent being told what to do with MY money because it is, after all, MY money. And since it's MY money I can do whatever I want with it. Right? Jesus took a different view. Nothing reveals the condition of the heart like money. That is why it may get uncomfortable in here today. "The Bible contains more than five hundred references to prayer and almost five hundred reference to faith, but there are more than two thousand references to money and possessions. Out of thirty-eight parables that Jesus told in the Gospels, sixteen deal with how we handle our money. Jesus said more about money and possessions than about heaven and hell combined. One out of every ten verses in the Gospels deals with money or possessions- 288 verses in the four Gospels." (Philip Yancey, *Grace Notes*, p. 56).

As we come to the end of our series called *Life Together*, I want to talk about one more essential practice in the life of the church. It is called giving - offering up a portion of your income as an act of worship. Covenant cards...

Worship is the only reasonable response to the greatness and majesty of God. Everyone worships something. Naturalists worship nature. Buddhists worship Buddha. Hindus worship many gods. Muslims worship Allah. Atheists worship themselves since they can conceive of nothing greater than themselves to worship. There are many ways to worship God. Eyes open, eyes closed; standing or sitting; kneeling or lying prostrate before the Lord. Of all the ways to express devotion to God the most genuine expression of worship is the offering. No matter how different the object of worship or how strange the manifestations of worship the one common denominator of our worship is the offering. It seems that we instinctively know that worship that costs us nothing is not really worship.

When you read through the NT as we have, you are struck by the fact that even in the midst of persecution, the early church excelled in the practice of giving. Let's take a look at Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church in 2 Cor. 8:1-9 and see if we can take away a few principles that will enhance our worship through giving.

I. Giving generously is a manifestation of God's grace. (vv. 1-2). Letting go is contrary to our nature. "There is within the human heart a tough, fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess. It covets things with a deep and fierce passion." A.W. Tozer (*The Pursuit of God*, p. 22). We are all born with the desire to acquire. Whatever it is, we want it, we want it all and we want it now. That's human nature. Only by God's grace coupled with our faith will we overcome our human nature and let go of the resources we have to support God's kingdom work.

The Macedonian churches gave even though they didn't have much. Grace-giving is not dependent upon circumstances. Grace-givers see themselves as a conduit through which God distributes His grace. The believers in Macedonia gave in spite of their circumstances.

II. Giving generously is an expression of gratitude. (vv. 3-5). They did not give out of external guilt but internal gratitude. They gave "of their own accord" with "an abundance of joy." Their giving was done with willing enthusiasm. In fact, the Macedonians (cities north of Corinth i.e. Philippians, Thessalonians, and Bereans) "begged" to give. (v. 4). I've never heard of anyone begging their church to take an offering although I once read of something close to it.

In the 1840's German immigrants settled in the Fredericksburg area. Eventually they knew they needed to build a school for their kids. So many families wanted to donate their land for the school that the location was selected in an unusual way. Those good people decided to have a foot race to see who would have the privilege of donating the land. Mathias Schmidt, a farmer, won the race and in 1878 Crabapple School was built on his land. I can't help but think that today's race would be a lot different - the LOSER would have to give up his land!

Closer to home, last week I preached at One Community Church. A couple of years ago this new congregation built their first worship center. It cost 13.7 million dollars. They paid it off in one year out of gratitude for what God has done.

God prospers us not to raise our standard of living, but to raise our standard of giving. Paul commends the churches of Macedonia for, "they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability, entirely on their own." 2 Cor. 8:3

III. Giving generously is inspired by God's generosity. (vv. 6-7). God is a generous giver. All through the scriptures God lavishes His blessings on His people. As the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land, "a land flowing with milk and honey," God reminded them that they would enjoy, "great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Dt. 6:10-12

They were to remember where their blessings came from. That's why the NT writers constantly remind us of God's abundant provision:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with *every spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places..." Eph. 1:3;

"His divine power has granted to us *all things* that pertain to life and godliness..." 2 Pe. 1:3

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us *all things*?" Ro. 8:32

We worship a generous God. Our worship is a conscious admiration and devotion to a God whose nature is to give. Those who worship Him will emulate Him.

The Corinthians had experienced God's abundant grace. They excelled in so many things - faith, speech, knowledge. But v. 7 seems to indicate they were not excelling in giving. I want our church to excel in this grace also. Statistics on giving...Flat budget...no new missionaries or missions initiatives. We owe 1.3 million...This is a generous congregation but we can do better.

IV. Giving generously is the essence of the gospel. (vv. 8-9). Paul calls upon the example of Jesus to show that giving and loving are practically synonymous. Jesus gave His life willingly as a result of His love for us.

John 15:12-13 ¹² "Love one another, just as I have loved you. ¹³ "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

John 3:16 ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He *gave* His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

1 Timothy 2:5-6 ⁵ For there is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who *gave* Himself as a ransom for all,

Eph. 5:1-2 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children;² and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and *gave* Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

Over the course of this series we have considered many of the essential practices of the church. We've talked about fellowship, leadership, discipleship the mission of the church, the sacraments. All these are vitally important to the life and health of a church. So is giving. Look at 8:9. Why did Jesus do this? The answer is in 9:11. So long as we are a conduit of God's blessings we will continue to receive more than we need. God wants you rich. God will bless you with more than you need not so that you can have more than you need but so that you can be blessing to others.

But if our hearts are divided and we fall in love with this world then instead of being a force for good we will become a monument to the past.

I once had the privilege of being treated to a meal in an historic restaurant in Segovia, Spain. The restaurant called Meson de Candido, serves customers as it has for over a century, in the shadow of an ancient Roman Aqueduct. Up to just a few years ago that 2,000 year-old aqueduct was still functioning. Then they stopped the flow of water in the aqueduct since it was no longer necessary. An amazing thing is happening to that incredible landmark. It is eroding fast. It seems that as long as it was doing what it was designed to do it remained healthy and strong. Now that it has been shut off it is deteriorating badly.

God created you to be a conduit of His blessings which He gives beyond measure. Giving in living. So give, and watch what God does. Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you." Lk. 6:38.

Covenant cards...