

“Now, About This Offering”

We’re going to be looking at 2 Corinthians, chapter 9 today. To better understand this chapter, we need some background information. One of the things close to the heart of the Apostle Paul was a collection he was organizing for the church in Jerusalem. This was the mother church, and Jewish Christians there were poor. Paul was working diligently to get Gentile churches to give, and to help them out.

Paul is writing to believers in the church in Corinth. He refers to this offering, but he uses this as a springboard to talk in more general terms about *Christian giving, financial stewardship*. So let’s look at this chapter. The first thing we note is that ***Paul was asking for money in response to a need***. Followers of Jesus in Jerusalem were extremely poor. Paul is enlisting others in the church to help them out by giving money.

We’re not the first generation of church people who are asked to give! I’ve run across some people in the church who think that pastors shouldn’t talk about giving. Well, they certainly didn’t come to that conclusion by reading the Bible! In the Old Testament, Hebrews gave to maintain the temple, to support the priesthood, and to help the needy. In the New Testament, believers gave to help the poor and widows and to spread the message of Jesus throughout the world. Jesus and His disciples were supported by those who gave money to their ministry! Luke 8:1-3 tells us: “Soon afterwards (Jesus) went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.”

So, when I talk about giving, and challenge us to give to the work of the Lord, I am not breaking new ground, or doing anything that hasn’t been part of our tradition!

Secondly, the Corinthians had pledged to give. 2 Corinthians 9:1-2 says, “Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them.” Paul had heard about their enthusiasm and their pledge to help!

In some churches, the word “pledge” or the words “pledge card” are like swear words. “Oh, don’t say the P word here!” (We use pledge cards here at Community church, but call them “Estimate of Giving” cards – and I like that!).

You always have the person in church who says, “Well, I don’t believe in pledging.” *Really!* I don’t believe I’ve ever met a person who truly doesn’t believe in pledging. If you’ve ever taken out a mortgage on a house, you pledged regular payments to a bank or a mortgage company. If you’ve ever used a credit card, you’ve pledged to pay off the balance. If you’ve gotten married, you pledged certain things to your spouse – like being faithful. If you’ve ever joined scouts, a lodge, or a civic club, you probably pledged something to that organization. If you’ve ever taken a job, you pledged to do a certain amount of work in return for pay. So, when a church asks us

to make a financial commitment, we're not way out of line, and asking something totally inappropriate! Making a financial commitment to the church has at least two benefits: first, it gives the Finance Committee some idea of how much income to expect for the coming year. (So, if a budget is \$130,000, and you get \$18,000 in pledges, you know you've got a problem!) But making some kind of pledge to the church also benefits us spiritually – it helps us set goals for our giving, and helps us discipline ourselves in this area. (Remember: There is nothing legal about an Estimate of Giving card. If for some reason our situation changes financially, and we have to reduce our pledge, or even want to increase our pledge, we can easily do that by contacting the church office). Intentional giving...pledging...is a sensible way to practice good stewardship!

In these same verses (2 Corinthians 9:1-2) we see that ***the commitment the Corinthians believers made was worth bragging about!*** “I know your eagerness (to give), which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia” (2 Corinthians 9:2). There is a bit of humor behind what Paul is writing here. He had bragged about the believers in *Macedonia* to the Corinthian church; he also bragged about the Corinthians' generosity to the Macedonian Christians. Now, he's a little afraid that those in the Corinthian church won't follow through, and he'll be made to look foolish because of his bragging. So he's going to send several of the brothers to Corinth to make sure they're *ready* with the collection when he gets there!

I think there are some things worth bragging about when it comes to your giving as a church! We are a small congregation. Many are on fixed incomes. Yet, over the past few years, much has been accomplished. We have made major repairs and upgrades to the building. We have given to a number of local missions. We've paid our conference apportionments in full. We have brought a music director onto our staff. And there's been very little dipping into any reserves funds! *I commend you!* Keep it up! So if I brag to people about you, don't make me look foolish!

Paul was devoted to getting the collection together for believers in Jerusalem who badly needed help, and in discussing that, we learn some important things about Christian giving and financial stewardship. We learn, also, about ***the spirit in which we are to give.*** “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” (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

Then too, we are to give willingly. “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion” (verse 7). Nobody likes to be told what to give. I heard once about a church that told each member what they were expected to give. I'm sure that went over in jolly fashion with everyone! We each have to make up own mind what to give. We each have to ask: “Is this church deserving of my financial support?” “How much am I willing to give to the ministry of this congregation? This church is supported by our willingness to give. No arm twisting. No clever gimmicks. We don't do fundraising. I'm not a fan of fund-raising in the church. You may disagree, but I believe the Biblical way to support the gospel ministry is for

God's people to give! When you think about it, it would take an awful lot of fundraising to support the church's budget. You would have to sell a ton of hoagies, or containers of soup, or ham dinners, to support an annual budget of over four or five hundred thousand dollars, or even our comparatively small budget of a little over \$100,000. I love the old story where the treasurer of a church's Ladies Aid Society (the old name for the women's group in the church) went to the bank to make a deposit. Handing the money and deposit slip to the teller, she said, "Here's the Aid money." The teller thought she said, "Here's the *egg* money." Wanting to be pleasant, the teller said, "Well, the old hens certainly were busy last week, weren't they?" Well, God's work gets done when God's people give *willingly*.

Then, Paul says: ***We are to give cheerfully.*** "God loves a cheerful giver" (verse 7b). The Greek word is *hilaron*, from which we get "hilarious"! Give hilariously! God loves it when we give with a big happy face! Think of it, how would you like it if somebody gave you a Christmas or birthday present, and with a sour look on their face said, "I hope you realize, this cost me a lot of money", or "Here's your gift; I wish I didn't have to give it."

As I read the Old Testament, I get the impression that the Hebrews *had fun* when they presented their tithes and offerings to God. They sang. They praised God in a joyful way like they were having a party! Gee, maybe when we take the offering, we ought to sing a peppier offertory response than the doxology. Or, maybe next week when we have the opportunity to bring our commitment cards up front to the altar, we ought to be dancing up and down the aisle. God just loves a cheerful giver – one who gives with a touch of hilarity!

Then, too, we are to give generously. If each of us were asked how much is "generous", we would have our own way of measuring and defining what "generous giving" is. But the Bible doesn't leave it to chance, nor just to our own opinions! *The tithe, or 10%, is the standard or beginning point for giving that runs through Scripture.* Giving one-tenth of our income back to God is a way of saying thank you to God, and also acknowledging that *even what we keep* really belongs to God. We are only stewards, or managers, of what God has put in our hands for this brief time on earth. The Hebrews, actually, gave *more than* the tithe – there were other offerings in addition to the tithes for the Hebrew people.

Jesus' sharpest and simplest word on what generosity means is in the story of the widows' s mite – where a poor widow gave *all she had*. It's not the *amount* we give – since our financial status varies. It's *how much of a sacrifice* which our giving represents that's the true measure of our generosity. So, when we put money in the offering plate, or give to some other ministry or other type of charity, look at what we give and ask: How much of a sacrifice is this for me?

2 Corinthians 9 says a lot about our giving to the Lord's work and how we are to give. But it also tells us what happens when we give willingly...cheerfully...and generously. ***First, we are blessed, and God provides our needs.*** "The point is this, the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). There's a spiritual law: When we give little away, we get back little; when we give generously, we get back in generous proportion!

In my early years of ministry I served 3 country churches in the Pocono mountains. We lived in a parsonage that was out in the country, and had a very large back yard. A man in church offered to come over with his tiller and till a plot for a garden. We never had garden before, but I said “Sure.” He tilled a rather large area. And so, we planted cucumbers, squash, carrots, lettuce, corn. We planted 30 tomato plants! It turned out to be a wet summer. We had cucumbers and squash coming out our kazoo! And yes, plenty of tomatoes! We had so many we didn’t know enough people to give all the tomatoes away! But it felt good! This summer, didn’t get any cucumbers or squash or corn or lettuce or carrots. Why? Maybe because we didn’t plant the seeds! We didn’t get back tons of tomatoes. But we only planted 3 tomato plants, not 30.

I believe the Bible teaches that there is a spiritual law that says we *get back* pretty much in proportion to *what we give away!* Now some people have trouble with that theology or Biblical interpretation. They chide, “That’s just selfish!” Yes – if our primary motive for giving is to get. Our motivation for giving should be love, and our desire to help people, and to get the gospel into the world. But the Bible is practical, and promises that *we ourselves get blessed in our giving! God provides our needs. We can’t outgive God.* And that goes for *churches* too!

Paul told us this: “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 (2 Corinthians 9:8-11). Did you catch what this is telling us? We give, and God gives back to us, so that we will always have enough to give away to others! I love Jesus’ words: “Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Luke 6:38).

Something else happens when we give generously to others and to the Lord’s work (and this is obvious): ***others are blessed, and God is glorified.*** Look at verses 12-13 (from the New Living Testament) “So two good things will result from this ministry of giving – the needs of the believers in Jerusalem will be met, and they will joyfully express their thanks to God. As a result of your ministry, they will give glory to God.” Come on now – doesn’t it feel good to know someone is helped and blessed by our giving? Isn’t it much better to part with some of our money rather than keeping it all just for ourselves? People are blessed when we give. God is glorified when we give!

Remember: God loves a cheerful, hilarious giver!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
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