

“The Bottom Line”

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶ *The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

⁷ *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

⁸ *And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”*

¹⁰ *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. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! (ESV)*

It was August 1995 when Paul Harvey told a story on his radio show about a woman who called the Butterball turkey hotline. If you have a Butterball turkey you can call the hotline and ask them any questions. The lady called the Butterball turkey hotline and got Butterball answer man on the phone. She said, “We just found a Butterball turkey in the bottom of our freezer that’s been there for 23 years. Is it still edible?” He said, “Has it been frozen solid that whole time?” She said, “Well, yes, it has.” He said, “Well, it’s edible but if I were you I don’t think I’d eat it.” She said, “We didn’t plan on eating it. We planned on giving it to the church.” I was almost afraid to tell that story because I was wondering if it might have been one of you. Isn’t that how most of us think about giving? We’ve got something extra that we don’t need or can’t use and it may or may not be worth something. “Well, let’s just give it to the church and check it off the list. If nothing else, it helps us de-clutter our freezer. It’s a win-win.”

Last week and this week I’m talking about giving. We looked at it last week from the perspective of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. The first letter to the Corinthians was written a year prior to this letter. The Jerusalem church is having some kind of financial hardship; they’re being persecuted and they need some resources. So Paul decides that he’s going to have a capital campaign to raise money from the Gentile churches. At the end of I Corinthians, chapter 16 Paul basically tells them, “I’m going to see you in a year. Put aside something every week and when I come to see you I will collect the money.” Now, it’s sort of a mystery. Apparently Titus was in Corinth between the time they made a commitment to give something and when Paul was going to show up. Titus came back and told Paul, “You know about that Corinthian collection thing?” Paul said, “Well, yeah. Are they ready?” And Titus said, “Nah, I don’t think so. I know they committed to a certain amount, but they don’t really look like they’re doing it. You’re going to show up and I just feel like maybe you ought to write them a letter and let them know that you’re going to be coming and that might spur them on a little bit.” So Paul does. He writes them about a number of things. However, in 2 Corinthians he takes two whole chapters to write them about this collection that he’s making for the Jerusalem churches. He could have just said, “Hey, I’m coming to see you guys. You better be ready.” Instead, he tells them that but in the process he gives them all of these motivations for giving, why they should be giving, why they can give, what giving is all about. That is where we are learning about giving as well. He talks to them first about giving from the perspective of the Macedonians. The Macedonians were apparently very poor churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, yet Paul says, “Their generosity overflowed from them.” So what do we learn from them? He says, “Let us remember the grace of God shown to the Macedonians.” In other words, when you think about giving, the first thing you need to think about is, “Do you realize that everything that I have is a result of God’s grace?” Everything. We tend to think, “There but by the grace of God go I.” Not just the material possessions you have were given to you by God, but even your health is yours by the grace of God, and your intellect is yours by the grace of God. The fact that you have the ability to save and earn money all comes to you by grace. That’s the first thing you need to realize when you think about giving. The second thing is that God owns everything. We’ve learned that from the Macedonians. They gave themselves completely to the Lord. They basically said, “You own it.” If you want to experience freedom in your life, begin to look at yourself and say, “God owns all my stuff. If God owns it then it really doesn’t matter. I need to take care of it, but if I lose it or if I give it away it’s okay because it’s God’s. I didn’t lose anything; I’m just a channel for things.”

I told you the story last week about my pickup truck in college. The most freeing moment of my life is when I went to college and everyone wanted to borrow my pickup truck and I didn't want it to get dented up. I started somehow learning (maybe I heard some sermons about giving) and realized that everything belonged to God, including this truck. So at some point people asked to borrow my truck and I'd just throw them the keys. They said, "You're just going to give me your truck?" "That's God's truck." Now if I were you I'd be very careful with God's truck. By the end of college (and seminary as well), that was the most dented-up, ugly truck. But it was a great truck because I never had to worry about it. How much of your stuff do you have that you feel that way about? We're all in process. When I was talking to my men's small group this week, I said, "I'd give you my truck, but I don't know if I'd let you borrow any of my woodworking tools right now." So we're all in process. But when you think about your stuff—your home, your cars,—do you realize that God owns all of it? The other thing we learned from the Macedonians is that their giving means a sacrifice in their lifestyle. For your giving to be up to biblical standards it probably needs to hurt some. When you give, are you giving by rote by just writing a check? Do you feel it? Do you sit down and say, "Honey, how much do you think we can give this year?" Then you write the check and you sort of wince. That's how you know you're on the right track, if you're giving sacrificially. The biggest motivation Paul gave to the Corinthians for giving was simply the gospel of Jesus. He said, "Now remember the grace of the Lord Jesus, Who though He was rich, became poor for your sakes. And through His poverty, you have become rich." We talked about how not only in the stuff we have are we relying on the grace of Jesus, but even our very souls, that Jesus has saved us from our sins and given us the righteousness of God. It's ours, we possess it and we own it. The last thing Paul says to them was basically, "Finish what you started. You committed a certain amount to this Jerusalem collection and now you need to finish what you started." The next thing he gives is what I'm going to call an "administrative bridge" before we get to the text we're looking at today. Notice that I skipped a big chunk in there. Basically what Paul tells them next is how and why the collection is going to be taken. He says, "I'm sending three guys to you. I'm sending Titus as my partner and your pastor." They loved Titus. He says, "I'm also sending a guy (we don't know his name) who is famous among the churches for preaching the gospel." A lot of commentators think that's actually Luke, the doctor who wrote the gospel of Luke and, the book of Acts. Then finally he says, "We're sending the brother who's trustworthy in all things." In other words, "We're sending an accountant," it sounds like. Those men will be appointed by the churches to have someone representing Paul and someone representing the other churches. So basically you have built-in financial accountability. Paul says, "We're doing this so that we'll be above reproach in the eyes of God, but also in the eyes of man." Then Paul talks about why he is sending the three guys. If you didn't know better, you'd almost think Paul was being a little manipulative here. Let me read to you what he says to them in chapter 9, verse 1.

¹Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, ²for I know your readiness, of which I boast 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. (ESV)

He's saying, "I know that writing this letter is unnecessary (superfluous). I know that I don't need to send it, but I wanted to remind you that the reason that the Macedonians gave so generously and have such zeal to participate in this collection is because I told them how zealous you were." In other words, Paul is saying, "The reason the Macedonians were so generous is because I bragged to them about how generous you would be when we showed up. Now, I'm getting ready to show up and I'm going to have some Macedonians with me. It would be really humiliating for me and for you if you didn't show yourselves to be generous." I don't think he's trying to be manipulative but he's just saying it. He said, "The reason I'm sending these guys ahead is so that when I get there it will seem as if you gave willingly rather than having it exacted from you." When Paul gets there with the Macedonians they can celebrate what the Corinthians have given rather than Paul having to cajole them or pull it out of them. That leads us to our text now. After that, at each point Paul takes you to a point in this particular portion of the letter where you either feel guilty or you feel something. It's like, "Man, I'm not compelled to give but if I don't give I'm sort of wrong. What is it?" Listen to verse 5.

⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction. (ESV)

Then after that, he bottom-lines it. He tells them why the gift that they're going to give is not going to be an exaction, why they shouldn't give it as if they were compelled about it. We're going to look at three things this morning. The first point is simply the bottom line to giving in this case and all cases. Then the second thing we'll look at it is the reason we can give generously, according to Paul. The third thing we'll look at is the reason we should give generously. So let's look first at the bottom line. In verse 6 Paul says,

⁶ *The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

⁷ *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*
(ESV)

Verse six begins literally with Paul saying, "Here's the bottom line." You expect some sort of great wisdom, and he gives it, but it's simpler than we thought. He says, "Whoever sows sparingly also reaps sparingly, whoever sows generously, reaps generously." That's common sense, is it not? If a farmer spreads a lot of seed he can expect a greater harvest. If a farmer spreads very little seed he can expect a very little harvest. Paul says, "If you sow sparingly you're going to reap sparingly. If you sow generously you will reap generously." I think that Paul's getting at the point that giving is by faith. In this agricultural metaphor, a farmer always sows by faith, does he not? He throws the seed out there and everything else that is completely out of his control makes these seeds grow. He might fertilize them but it might not rain. But also, we're going to find out later, he sows what he's been given to sow, and the more he sows the more he will be given to sow. This is a very abused passage if you look at the sort of stereotypical TV preachers. They say, "If you want to be wealthy, then give us money, and if you give us money that's planting a faith seed for which God will bless you five times over," and that kind of thing.

I read a great story this week. A guy was talking about a ministry that had sent him a letter that said, "If all of our viewers gave us \$50 each then we will have all the money we need for our ministry and you will be blessed five times over." He wrote the ministry back and said, "It seems like a better fund raising idea, then, would be for you to send me \$50. By giving me \$50 you'll be blessed five times over and your ministry will be five times as big as it is now." Paul's just giving a general principle here that everyone would have nodded their head to, sort of like you are. You sow sparingly, you reap sparingly. You sow generously, you reap generously. Then he narrows it down, and Paul does something interesting here. When you read through Paul's letter he almost never uses the term "saint" in the singular. Whenever you read the word "saint" it's always plural. He's always addressing the church. In this particular instance he actually addresses the individual. In the very next verse notice what he says.

⁷ *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*
(ESV)

The first thing he says is each one, each individual must give as he has decided in his heart. If you were here last week I talked about the fact that you need a plan. How much have you decided to give? Do you sit down at the beginning of the year and say, "Honey, how much are we going to give this year?" Or maybe when you hear sermons on stewardship that's when you sit down. He said, "Each one must give." Then he qualifies it. He said, "Not reluctantly and not under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Now, when you begin to think about the two ends of the continuum there, is there any option but cheerfulness? He says, "I don't want you to give reluctantly. In other words you don't grit your teeth and say, "I don't want to give it but I will." He doesn't want you to give under compulsion. "I have to give. The Elders were just at my house looking at my tax forms and they're going to tell the whole church." We don't do that, by the way. But, somehow you feel under compulsion to give. Well, between those two ends of the continuum, what other option is there? If you're not reluctant and you're not under compulsion then you must be willing or glad to do it. One of the reasons you'd want to be glad is because you know that everything is by grace. You know that God owns everything. But you also know that the more you sow the more you reap. Paul talks about that in a little while.

What's the point there? It's that all of us are either a funnel of grace or a bucket of grace. Either grace flows through you or you just receive and receive and receive and receive. The problem is when things flow into a bucket eventually it just stops.

We're designed to be channels of grace. I thought about this when I was a sales rep for Eli Lilly. All sales reps are competing against other companies, for sure, but you're also competing against other sales reps in your company. When you're competing against other sales reps in your own company, what you're competing for resources that the company is willing to give you. In other words, your manager will get several thousand dollars each quarter that she can give to whomever she wants. My manager was a woman who gave to whomever she wanted in order to put on programs and things that are ultimately going to make you more successful. So the more successful you are and the more you sell, the more resources you are going to get in order to sell more. So from God's perspective every one of us, if you're a Christian, is called to be a steward of all the things that God has given you, and God is going to give you a certain amount. If you're God, who would you give more stuff to? The person who is going to use it how you asked them to, the person who is going to produce more generosity or the person who wasn't? That where Paul is moving here. He says, "You should be willing to give cheerfully, but let me tell you why you can give cheerfully. Because the more generous that you are the more God will give you so that you can be more generous. God is in the business of generosity. The more you and I give the more God is going to give us, not in order that we may expand our own personal wealth, but He will give us more in order for us to give more. Let's look at what he says next.

⁸ *And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.* ⁹ *As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."* ¹⁰ *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.* ¹¹ *You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way . . . (ESV)*

Did you notice the universals that Paul used in verse 8? How is it that you can be a cheerful giver? How can Paul say that with a straight face? It sounds counterintuitive that you'd be a cheerful giver, yet Paul says, "Here's how. It's because you realize that God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency (or contentment) in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, 'He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'" On one hand Paul says, "The reason you can be confident and that you can give generously is because you know that God is able to meet all of your needs, that he can show you all grace at all times, in all situations, in all contentment, in all sufficiency, so that you can be generous in everything that you do. What makes that possible is the very next thing that Paul says. He quotes Psalm 111. He says, "God has distributed freely, he gives gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." The reason Paul can say that God is going to do all these things is because of the same thing we talked about last week, and it's this thing we call the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you read through the Old Testament there is one thing that is constantly and consistently linked with the righteousness of God, and that is His care for the poor. Do a study on it. In fact, when you read the prophets, the prophets are generally upset or their communicating God's anger for one of two reasons, or both. One reason is injustice and the other reason is that Israel, or in our case the church, is not caring for the poor. Almost all of the prophets talk about that. What does it mean when it says, "His righteousness endures forever" or "His righteousness ultimately distributes to the poor." It's that in the Old Testament this word "righteousness" is a little hard to pin down sometimes. At the end of the day you could also translate it as something like "covenant loyalty" or "covenant faithfulness." The reason that God distributes to the poor is because He is faithful to His covenant. What does that have to do with us? It has everything to do with us because you and I are poor, maybe not materially but spiritually. God has provided for us as well, and He's provided for us on the basis of His covenant faithfulness. You and I have not been faithful to God's covenant. We have sinned. We've not been obedient in everything that we have done, but there is One Who came Who is completely loyal, completely faithful to God's covenant, and that is Jesus. For the person who trusts in Jesus, you will be credited with His covenant faithfulness. God will give it to you by faith. So God's righteousness now transfers to you. What's supposed to happen next? Paul says in this particular case that our righteousness that we receive from Jesus works itself out in generosity. Notice what he says next.

¹⁰ *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.* ¹¹ *You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way . . . (ESV)*

What does it mean to live out this thing called the gospel? What does it mean to be what you are? What does it mean to live out the righteousness of Christ? Among other things it means that you are becoming in your being more and more generous

because that is what God does. That's how we can be because God shows us all grace in all times in all situations for all things and in every situation He enables us to be generous. The more we are generous the more He will enable us to be generous.

So what now? I can give because God's going to provide me everything, but why should I give? Paul gives us some incredibly lofty things here when he talks about why we should give. There a lots of reasons why we shouldn't. In fact, the reasons we shouldn't are almost the exact mirror opposites of why we should. Listen to why we should.

¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, (ESV)

This is backwards from the way the world looks at things. He says, "Why should you be generous? Besides meeting the needs of the saints, your generosity will issue forth in thanksgiving to God." Why is that so backward? Because a lot of people give for the sole purpose of hearing someone else say, "Thank you." There are people that I've known in the course of my life where they give you something and you almost get the sense that they're just waiting for you to say, "Thank you." And if you don't say "thank you" quickly enough, they almost get upset and let you know about it. If you believe that everything has been given to you by God, do you really ever expect people to be thankful to you? Anything you give to someone else has been given to you by God so you shouldn't expect thanks. Should you say "thanks"? I think you should. On the other hand, you don't need to receive thanks all the time because you know what you have been given has come from God and gone to that person. But there's something else. Through your generosity, Paul says to the Corinthians, it's going to get people in a different geographical location, in a different spiritual state are going to give thanks because of your submission to the gospel and your willingness to give. That's huge. For example, I've thought a lot about my trip to Ethiopia. We don't live in the most fancy house in the world, but I wonder sometimes if I would be embarrassed to bring some of the Ethiopian pastors to my house, because compared to how they live, I live in a palace. It's opulent. At least it's not corrugated steel. I did a pastors conference for all these Ethiopian pastors and one of the most moving things in my ministry, ever, is when the pastor's conference was over, they all stood around me and laid hands on me and sung thanksgiving to God. You know, they could have said "thank you" to me and patted me on the back, but to hear them sing praises changed me. So the reason we give, the reason we're generous ultimately, is so people that aren't just within our geographical reach or within the sound of our voice can give thanks to God. We do it by way of missions. It has bothered me ever since my trip to Ethiopia that in most churches in the United States and in this one as well, almost all of our money goes to taking care of ourselves. Every year since I've been here there have been these little cat fights because people are arguing about what should be cut and what shouldn't be cut and what should be spent and what shouldn't be spent. There's almost no talking about if we didn't have a mortgage or bills, we could be ushering thanksgiving to God from all over the world. Instead we choose to fight about small things which ultimately end up taking care of ourselves. I don't know any way to say it than to say that's wrong. Do we see ourselves not just as stewards? We tend to give because there's a need. "Gosh, the church's lights are going to be turned out, or we need to pay this." But, we need to have a greater goal for giving. When you think of your giving do you think, "By this check that I'm writing, do I actually envision people from around the globe or people from around my neighborhood giving thanks to God and singing praises because of my generosity?" Or do I think, "I just need to do it because they preached about stewardship again and I feel guilty." I don't want you to give out of guilt. We need to give because we have this great vision for the gospel and what Jesus is going to do in people's lives both in our neighborhood and around the world. That's where we need to be. And we need to quit bickering about taking care of ourselves and get past that. What's the last thing Paul tells them?

¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. (ESV)

He basically says there's a quid pro quo [one thing in return for another] going on here: "You wealthier Corinthians are going to give money to help the people in Jerusalem but what you don't understand, is that by your gift, they not only thank God for you, but they actually pray for you." In the United States we're such rugged individualists and we think we just need to get

together and have a meeting and decide what we can do about our finances and just fix it. We know how to budget, and we know how to cut, and we know how to do this, and very little prayer goes on. Fortunately, among the poor arguing about money isn't really a big deal. I know. I grew up poor. So what do you do? You spend a lot more time in relationship and prayer. Paul says, "That's what you get out of it, Corinthians. Your generosity ushers forth prayer." So the question is, "Are you going to give generously?" Whether you give here or somewhere else, it's a question between you and God and your own heart.

I'll just end with this. . Yesterday was a big event for me. Every now and then as your kids are growing up you can watch a movie that you thought they were too young for before. And you think at some point they're going to get to watch "Tombstone" with me at some point. Well yesterday my youngest daughter and I, the whole family eventually started watching. We decided it was okay for her to watch, "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer." It's one of my favorite movies of all time. As I was watching "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer," it made me think about my sermon today which made me think about every superhero movie I've ever seen. Then I started zeroing in on "Spiderman II." That's how the ADD mind works, by the way. In every superhero movie or in the comic books, someone is given a special power. If you're Spiderman you have "spidey-sense" and webs, you can climb on walls. And if they don't use that power to benefit other people, you feel upset, don't you? Why? Because you look and say, "Look at all that person has been given and yet they're not using it for the sake of humanity." Remember Peter's Uncle Ben's words at the end of "Spiderman I"? "With great power comes great responsibility." In "Spiderman II" he decides he's sick of it. "I'm sick of being there for everyone else. I'm sick of give, give, give, give, give. I'm going to live for Peter Parker," and he stops being Spiderman. That whole time, it's about one-third of the movie, it's sickening. Why? Because he's Spiderman and only he can do these things. He has been given gifts in order to help other people and he's not doing it. The interesting thing is not only was he not doing it, but the longer he went without exercising the gifts God had given him, the more they diminished until he got to a point where he had no spidey-powers anymore. That has everything to do with you because if you are in this room, and you are a citizen of the United States, if you're a member of this church, what that means is relative to the rest of the world, you are extremely wealthy. And you have been given incredible gifts, spiritually and financially. If it sort of irks you that Spiderman doesn't use the gifts that God had given him, what does it make you feel like when you consider that about yourself? Are you using the gifts that God has given you in order to help out other folks? Again, whether you give here or somewhere else, God has given you all of these things, and the reason He has given them to you is in order that you might give them away to others. The last thing Paul says here is rooting again in the Gospel. He says,

¹⁵ *Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! (ESV)*

Fortunately John's gospel is able to describe that. He says, "For God so loved the world" - what? "That he gave his only Son." Think about that.