

The Gifts of God for the People of God
2 Corinthians 9: 6-15 (NIV)

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Introduction

At the time when Paul wrote this letter to the Church in Corinth, there was a famine in Judea. The believers in Jerusalem and surrounding area were suffering. Of course at the time, relief organizations such as World Vision and Church World Service did not exist. So Paul writes to the believers in Corinth (as well as to churches he had planted) and asks them to consider a special offering to bring relief to those in need. That is the context for his appeal:

⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

⁹As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.” (a quote from Psalm 112:9)

¹⁰Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

¹²This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

(Pray)

One year ago this month (11/30/2017) a video clip shown on the Today show went viral. The subjects of the video (produced by Rob Bliss) were children from low income backgrounds, ages 8 to 12 years old.

The children were presented with a gift for themselves and a gift appropriate for their parent. Then they were told that they must choose between the two. They could keep only one gift.

Eighty percent of the children made the same choice. How many of you think they chose the gift for themselves?

How many think they chose the gift for their parent?

Nine-year-old Aaron Freeman deliberated between keeping a Minecraft Lego set for himself or jewelry for his mother. It only takes a moment before Aaron knows his answer:

“Legos don’t matter,” he says confidently. “Your family matters—not Legos, not toys—your family. So it’s either family or Legos and I choose family.”

He took the gift of jewelry for his mother. Eighty percent of the children did likewise, selecting the gift for their parents!

Imagine this: You have been given a lot of money. You are free to spend it, but you can't spend it in a way that will benefit you directly. What would you do with it? (Turn and tell your neighbor.) Guess what friends: You and I are already spending someone else's money! If everything is a gift from God, including our ability to earn money—then every dime we spend or invest, belongs to God too. You and I are stewards/managers of all that we have, and all that we have is given to us by God!

What is interesting in this letter to the Corinthians is that they had already made a financial pledge! They had promised to send a gift to Jerusalem to assist with famine relief, but for reasons unknown, they had not followed through. This is the reason Paul is writing. In the words of 9 year old Aaron Freeman, "Family matters!"

Ted Turner, media mogul and philanthropist, had pledged one billion dollars to the United Nations, over the course of ten years. At the time, it was the largest philanthropic gift ever given. However, his financial empire ran into difficulty and he was unable to fulfill his promise, at least on the original time table. (Ultimately he made good on it!)

Perhaps that is what happened in Corinth, on a much smaller scale. *What we need to understand however, is that unlike Ted Turner, the citizens and believers in Corinth were NOT prosperous, even by the standards of the ancient world. Many of them were poor.* In fact, in ancient times there was a huge gap between the poor and the wealthy upper class. The so-called middle class is a relatively recent development of the last century or so.

Paul begins with an agrarian illustration: sowing and reaping. Now those of you who are gardeners, get this. If you want to grow a "crop" of any kind: pumpkins, sunflowers, or whatever, one must sow seed accordingly. While we will grant that some plants, once planted, become self-propagating—they re-seed themselves—*the harvest depends in large part, on how much the gardener planted in the first place.* **Logic dictates that the harvest will be proportional to the planting: plant a little or a lot, and that same amount is what will be harvested!**

**Paul tells us the same principle applies to giving:
Give a little, receive a little. Give a lot, receive a lot.**

Paul challenges our self-centered way of thinking: If I give, then I'll have less, not enough for my needs. Paul teaches that **the opposite is true. Give, and you'll receive!** Another way of thinking about it, is the way a farmer thinks of planting seed: ***planting seeds is not a "donation", it is an "investment"!*** The result of seed planting is that it will benefit not only the farmer, but others as well.

Paul teaches that there are **three benefits** to “investing” in God’s Kingdom.

First, he promises that if we are generous with others, God will generously meet our needs as well.

“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (v.8)

This is not “blank check”, not an unconditional promise of God to prosper us financially, not the “health and wealth, name it and claim it gospel” that some television preachers promote! Rather it is a restatement of our stewardship verse for this year from Philippians 4:19, which says, **God will meet all our needs, not all our greed!** Indeed, may we learn to be content with what we have, and be thankful for that!

God’s priority is not that we will have enough to feed our greed, but that we will have **our basic needs** met and then some...and **then some to give** so that others benefit. **The first benefit is a promise that, if we share and invest what we have, God will supply our needs.**

The second benefit is one which endures: the benefit of a righteous character. *Many “rewards” in this life are temporary.* You earn miles on a credit card, or points toward discounts at certain retailers. If you don’t use them, you lose them. These rewards are temporary.

But God rewards those who “invest”/give, with **“enduring righteousness”**. Paul quotes Psalm 112: 9

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

“Righteousness” has to do with being in “right” relationships with God, with one another. It has to do with godly character that is lived out in how we treat one another, particularly how we treat the poor. Righteousness is practical action with and on behalf of others, particularly and perhaps especially in the face of injustice. This is not about earning points with God, but about doing things in the here and now, that will have a lasting, eternal impact!

Righteousness accrues to our eternal credit, if you will. It endures forever!

There is an old joke about two millionaires who were discussing an equally wealthy mutual friend who had died.

One commented: “I wonder how much he left?”

His friend replied: “All of it!”

Recently, Paul Allen was in the headlines, when he died. As co-founder of Microsoft, he had pursued many interests, in business, in sports, in science as well as supporting many philanthropic endeavors. I know nothing of his spiritual state, however it was clear that he contributed a great deal in the Seattle community and to concerns that were important to him. At his death, his wealth was estimated to be in excess of 20 billion dollars.

Whatever the sum of our estate, none of us can take so much as a dime with us. ***What matters is not how much we accumulate, but how much we invest in God's kingdom. How we live our lives—in right relationships, with justice and active concern for all, accrues to our eternal account as righteousness.***

In other words, when we sow/give generously, what we reap is far more than a temporary financial reward. We will experience God's pleasure!

The third benefit? When we give to others, they will in turn give thanks and praise to God! And they will pray for us as well.

¹This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. (v.12-14)

Actually there is a **triple benefit** here: The givers experience the joy of giving. The recipients will offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving to God (v.12) as well as prayers of intercession for the givers (v.14)

It sounds like a win-win-win to me! The believers in Jerusalem will receive the relief they need. They will give God the credit (praise and thanksgiving), and the givers will benefit from the prayers of the recipients who will pray and intercede for them.

This exchange results in a new, stronger connection that grows between the two churches. This is particularly significant because the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were not quite sure about those Gentile Christians in Corinth. There is some distrust...is their belief genuine? Are they "real" Christians? And if they are, how will we know for sure? Paul says that through the giving and receiving of gifts of support and of prayer, the relationships between believers are strengthened.

This is true today—when we support various ministries financially they keep us informed about what God is doing. We pray for them, they pray for us. It is a win-win!

So then, how shall we give?

Give generously (v.6). Refers to the reaping and sowing...if one is stingy in sowing seed, one will have a meager crop or return on one's investment. Sowing abundantly, results in a proportionately larger return!

The point however, is not the size of the gift. It is not how much we give, but how much we have left over that concerns Paul. Generous giving is sacrificial giving. It is an expression of trust in God, the most generous giver of all!

Give freely (v.7). Each person must decide in one's heart to give. The heart not the head, is the locus for decision making in biblical thought. So what is the condition of your heart and mine?

This has to do with our attitude. If we give reluctantly or under pressure, our hearts are not free. That kind of giving may benefit the recipient, but not the giver! It is not ours to judge another at this point. **God knows our bank balance, but more importantly: God knows our hearts. If giving does not bring us joy, then we need to ask God for a heart transplant (a change of heart)!**

Give Cheerfully (v.7). *Did you know that the root word in Greek from which "cheerful" is derived, is the very same root word for "hilarious"?* I think of hilarity as being a joy that cannot be contained—it overflows! This attitude should characterize our giving.

Do not give out of guilt. Do not give out of compulsion. Do not "give 'til it hurts"! Give 'til it feels good! Give out of gratitude!

For God has lavished love, grace, and countless blessings upon us—the most precious gift being the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross for our salvation.

Above all, no matter how generous our giving might be ours pales in comparison to the ultimate generosity of God! **The cross of Christ and the gift of salvation should never cease to produce in us, awe, wonder, and gratitude. Our gifts to God—our investments in God's Kingdom--are rooted in God's generosity to us in the person of Jesus.**

Indeed, thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

PRAY