

Giving and the Gospel

Where do we as Christians get the power to change our world, our community and our lives? The Bible says one of the critical keys to such power for change is a radical generosity with all that we own...

But where do we get the power to be generous?

THE POWER OF GIVING

Paul tells the Corinthians, who were a group of Greeks living in a beautiful port city: "Because of your giving by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God. . ." (2 Corinthians 9:13). Early Christianity spread like lightning across the Roman Empire, especially among the poor and slave classes, transforming lives and society in measure because of the radical generosity of those who had been changed by the Teacher named Jesus. An early Christian document describes the reason behind this:

"Christians busy themselves on earth but their citizenship is in heaven . . . They marry and have children but do not kill unwanted babies. They share their table with all, but not their bed with all. They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are poor and yet make many rich; they are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things."—letter to Diogenus

What made the early Church stand out was the undeniable evidence of their changed lives and values. They lived in a culture where people cared for themselves at the expense of others. The Christians cared for others at the expense of themselves. They gave their money away in eye-popping proportions to help people and to promote the church's ministry. Consequently, they found themselves actually more satisfied with their limited resources (short of everything . . . yet plenty of all things).

How did Christians transform the cool and corrupting Roman world? How did they sweep away all the older religious and social constructs of mythology and superstition?

Apparently, no one could match or explain the beauty of their lives. They gave away their resources in a proportion and with a joy that the surrounding materialistic culture had never seen and could not explain. The first Christians in Jerusalem immediately began to practice radical generosity. "Selling their possessions and goods they gave to any one as he had need" (Acts 2:45). They did not consider any of their possessions as their own (Acts 4:32).

Their generosity had an immense impact on the culture: "They enjoyed the favor of all people...The Lord added daily to their number" (Acts 4:47). Even the Roman Emperor Julian remarked, "Their success lies in their charity to strangers...The impious [Christians] support both their own poor and ours as well!"

The world was astonished by Christians' unmaterialistic lifestyle and profound generosity with everything that they owned.

THE POWER FOR GIVING

When Paul asks the Corinthians to give to famine victims in Jerusalem, he says, "I am not commanding you, but I am to test the sincerity of your love . . . for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:8-9). One chapter later he says Christian giving must never be motivated reluctantly or under compulsion but, "cheerfully," for by radical giving Christians "prove" themselves to be genuine children of God (2 Corinthians 9:6-7, 13). Paul's words are very searching in our American culture.

If we do not give away our money in remarkable proportions, we have not grasped (or we are not currently remembering) Christ's generosity in saving us. Let's put it more starkly: *You will always give effortlessly to that which is your salvation; to those things which give your life meaning.* If Jesus is the One who saved you, your money flows out easily into His work, His people, His causes. If however, your real religion is your appearance, or your social status, or your pleasure, your money flows most easily into those items and symbols.

Radical generosity is therefore an inevitable sign of real grace in the heart. A long time ago a Scottish preacher declared,

"There are many hearing me who now know that they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudging at all requires a new heart—an old heart would rather part with his life blood than with its money."—R.M. McCheyne

Imagine a person who is deathly ill, and he finds a doctor with a medicine that can cure him. "But," the doctor says, "the medicine is very expensive and you may have to give up your home and many of your possessions to purchase it." The ill person says, "So what? What good are my possessions and money to me if I don't have the medicine? It is now more precious to me than anything I own." These other things that used to seem so important are now expendable by comparison with the surpassing value of the medicine. Even so, the grace of God makes Christ so precious to us, that our possessions become eternally and utterly expendable to us. They used to be crucial to our happiness, but they are not so now. "To you who believe...He is precious" (1 Peter 2:7). If Jesus was the great God of the universe who was voluntarily torn to shreds on the cross to pay all your debts of sin, then your attitude toward all that you own is forever changed.

THE POWER IN GIVING

Some practical guidelines for Christian giving:

1. *The Guideline of the Tithe*

In the Old Testament all the people were required to give a tithe, one tenth of all their yearly agricultural produce (income) and one tenth of their flocks and cattle (capital). Examine Leviticus 27:30-34 and Malachi 3:6-12. God considers any smaller proportion as "robbery." Why? Everything that we have is really God's—we only have it because God gave it to us to use. Therefore we are trustees, His portfolio managers, His bankers, and He allows us to spend 90% of His wealth on ourselves. This is more than reasonable! A trustee who does not give the owner his due is robbing the owner.

In the New Testament, there is no direct command to believers to tithe. Instead, we are to model our giving on Christ's giving. What did Jesus give? He gave everything! How did Jesus give? He gave generously and with love! We are called to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices" (Romans 12:1), and to love the Lord with everything we have and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). There is no limit to what love will give, but God does suggest that the tithe is a minimum guideline for our giving, a foundational percentage.

2. The Guideline of Sacrifice

Paul tells us that the impoverished Macedonians contributed to the needy in Jerusalem. They gave as much as they were able and even beyond their abilities (2 Corinthians 8:3). In other words, they gave sacrificially. Our giving therefore must affect the way we live. It must cut into our lifestyle. Otherwise we are not giving in the biblical proportions marked by sacrifice. Jonathan Edwards kept meeting people who said, "I can't afford to give to the church and the poor." He concluded that we really mean, "I can't afford to give without greatly inconveniencing myself." Edwards wrote, "If we be never obliged to relieve others' burdens, except when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor's burdens, when we bear no burdens at all?"

If our giving does not burden us or cut into our lifestyles in any way, then our giving is not sacrificial (Mark 12:44).

3. The Guideline of Responsibility

While the Macedonians gave beyond their ability, Luke elsewhere tells us Christians gave "according to their ability" (Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 8:12). Many Christians realize that they cannot give in biblical proportions because they must first meet other God-given responsibilities (care for one's health and safety, caring for other family members, meeting legal financial obligations, etc.), some of which may be unnecessarily high. We must not be irresponsible in our obligations. Debts must be paid (Romans 13:8) and family needs taken care of with responsible action. But giving regularly, systematically and intentionally should not be put off until tithing is possible. God will accept and honor our gifts to Him at whatever level we are faithfully giving. A simultaneous strategy to pay off our debts or other obligations so we can increase our giving will honor the Lord.

4. The Guideline of Intentionality

Paul directed the Corinthians to be systematic and thoughtful in their giving. He told them to save a portion of their wealth each week to give to God's work (1 Corinthians 16:2). Usually, an actual tally of "spontaneous" and unplanned giving reveals that it was not done in biblical proportions and that there was little sacrifice involved. Paul presses us to be regular, to follow a plan; He continually sent the Corinthians reminders about their giving. This shows that we must be willing to let the church similarly instruct us. How easy it is to conveniently forget our resolutions and intentions! We must avoid subjectivity in giving and become intentional. Here are three ways to do that:

A. Study the Bible's teaching on giving:

- Read Matthew 6:19-34; Timothy 6:6-10; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-15; Malachi 3:6-12.
- Ask yourself: Do you need to adjust your giving in light of eternal values to change the world through radical generosity?

- B. Estimate what percentage of your money is going to:
- God's ministry through your local church (a primary recipient of our giving due to our commitment to and involvement in its ministries).
 - Other Christian ministries or missionaries.
 - Gifts in the name of Jesus to people with special economic/physical needs.
- C. Develop a plan of regular giving:
- Decide what percentage of your income you will give this year. Seek to follow the guidelines of the tithe and sacrifice.
 - Prayerfully determine how this portion will be distributed.
 - Develop a way to immediately set aside the Lord's portion of your income whenever you receive money. Decide what intervals (how and how often) you will give.
 - Write down the amount you plan to give, so you can compare it to your actual giving. This will help you check yourself during the year.

Most of these concepts about faith and money will make virtually no sense at all if you do not believe the Gospel. There can't be significant spiritual growth in your life unless your earnings and how you think about them are placed in God's hands. The more you trust in God with your material treasure, the more He will entrust you with His spiritual treasure (Luke 16:9-12). Look what happened when the Son of God opened His hand and let go of His wealth. He saved radically a countless host of people. Open your hand and watch His power flow into your world and life for radical change.

Adapted from Dr. Tim Keller.
Please contact us if you have any questions.



tab-pres.org | 540.932.1778