

"The Last of the Bigtime Spenders"
Stewardship Sermon
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
First Presbyterian Church – Boulder, Colorado
(2Cor. 8:1-9)

Introduction.

The first Christmas that Lorie and I spent together as a married couple was a memorable one. We had just been married for a few months, and we looked forward to our first tree, eggnog on Christmas Eve, and the exchange of presents. I'm sure that Lorie wondered what I would get her for that first Christmas. Something romantic.

Well, Christmas day came, and we sat down to give each other presents. We were both excited. And I had several packages to present to Lorie that day. Some of the presents I had purchased and one I had made, it was real romantic. But the first present from me that Lorie opened kind of set her back. As she torn open the wrapping paper, and lifted the top of the box, there she saw... a fire extinguisher! "We need one of these for the kitchen, don't we honey? Good practical gift, huh?" I said. I am sure that Lorie must have thought, "Boy, this fellah is really one of the last of the bigtime spenders!"

Today we look at a passage which unlike my gifts on that first Christmas with Lorie really does speak of a generous group of people, the Macedonian churches. In chapter 8 of 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul takes up an interesting subject, viz. that of the collection for the poverty-stricken saints in Jerusalem. For us who are far removed in time from the circumstances in which this epistle was written, the theme of a collection of \$ for poor Christians may see at first glance to be of little more than minor importance. But it was evidently not so for Paul, and we should investigate the reasons for this so that we might have a proper perspective of the significance of this matter for the early church. And in turn we can learn what this means for you and me as 20th century believers.

From its very earliest days the Apostolic Church had been confronted with the problem of extreme poverty of the Christian community in Jerusalem, the Church's "mother-city." The preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost, and on subsequent days, had resulted in the conversion of thousands of people. The financial and material cost to most of these new believers must have been immense. You see, these new Christians came from the background of Jewish fervor and exclusivism, and therefore, as a consequence of their conversion, they became the victims of social and economic ostracism. They also experienced excommunication, and even national disinheritance. Their businesses in many cases collapsed in ruins and family bonds were severed as they were disowned by relatives. For a Jew to

become a Christian meant financial and social catastrophe. The situation to which this led was met by the touching and spontaneous manner in which the members of this new young fellowship demonstrated their oneness of heart by sharing their possessions and resources with each other (Acts 4:32ff).

However, as the Church in Jerusalem grew in those early days, it very soon became apparent that the care for the poor in their community called for a systematic approach in control and direction. And so the 7 deacons were appointed to supervise this charitable work. Therefore, we can see that the first step in the organization of the early Church was to address the problem of poverty. Fascinating.

Now, for one reason or another, the church in Jerusalem continued to suffer financially throughout the 1st century, and periodically the Churches in Macedonia and Achaia (of which Cor. was the capital city) and elsewhere gathered special collections for the relief of the Christians in Jerusalem. This was kind of like the money we have collected for the relief of the victims of natural disasters. The orchestration of these collections played a central part in the Apostle Paul's activities, as we can see in our passage here before us. It was a matter which engaged his attention throughout the busy years of traveling and evangelism.

We should note that Paul regarded these acts of charitable giving as expressions of the organic unity of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. They afforded tangible evidence to the world that in Christ the needs of other believers are a concern to the whole body; when one member suffers, all suffer.

Now, having looked at a little background to the collection of which our passage is talking, let us examine closely what you and I can learn about principles of stewardship from these words of Scripture. Manner, Motive, Measure, and Model of Christian Giving.

I. The Manner of Christian Giving.

In seeking to stir up concern on the part of the Corinthians with regard to the special collection, Paul starts out by talking about the Macedonian Churches who had been so generous. And he says some very interesting things about the manner in which the Macedonian Churches had given.

First, Paul says in v.3 that *"they gave of their own free will."* In other words, they had given spontaneously of their own initiative. It seems that Paul had hesitated to ask the Churches in Macedonia for a collection because he knew that they themselves were poverty-stricken (v.2). But they sought him out and begged Paul *"earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints..."* (v.4).

Second, they gave contrary to their own ability. In v.3 we read, *"For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means."* The meaning of this paradox is this: in spite of the affliction and extreme poverty that the Macedonian Churches were experiencing, they still gave out of the resources

they had. The amount was not decided by what their neighbors gave, or even by what they could spare without inconvenience or hardship; they gave to the point of sacrifice. Impelled by love and compassion for brothers and sisters in Christ whom they had never even seen, they had given contrary to their ability.

And third, they had given themselves. Our passage reads, "*They 1st gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God*" (v.5). This is real stewardship, a dedication of one's whole life - time, talents, all. The gift of \$ was only a part of their offering. For the Christian there is no absolute right to property and possessions. In Mt.25:14, Jesus says that we as believers are stewards and trustees, or managers, of someone else's money, God's. And without self-giving there is no profound self-sacrifice. The Macedonian Christians held themselves and the few goods they had in readiness to perform what was right "*by the will of God.*" And all of this was done in humble and cheerful submission to the sovereignty of God's divine will for them. This, then, is the manner of Christian giving.

II. The Motive for Christian Giving.

One motive that Paul mentions here is that giving **alleviates human need.** When confronted with the cruel realities of a world that is increasingly divided on the basis of possessions of material goods, we as believers are called to seek to alleviate human need. Our Lord was concerned for the physical needs of people, as well as the spiritual ones.

He fed the 5,000;

He healed the blind man;

He cleansed the leper;

He comforted those who mourned.

God expects us to be like Jesus -- to be individually sensitive to the physical needs of those in this world around us. We need to live a bit more simply in order that others may simply live. We need to give to alleviate human need with our giving.

Another motive for Christian giving is that **it extends the Gospel.** When Lorie and I were interviewing with First Pres., we asked the members of the search committee very candidly, "What is First Pres.'s commitment to missions?" And we were delighted to learn that this church has designated approx. 25% of the total budget to missions for 1992. Our church's budget for this year reflects a total benevolence commitment of over \$368,000!

I had a marvelous missions professor in seminary by the name of **Christy Wilson**, and he had a favorite saying: "*When a church ceases to be mission-minded, it becomes a mission field!*" God has always blessed churches who were committed to giving to missions and extend the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, not everyone is called to go overseas and extend the Gospel personally. But everyone is called to be concerned for the lost of the world, and to give of themselves -- in prayer and in money. Over 2 billion people have yet to hear the name of J. The work is not done yet. Our Lord said, *"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the field"* (Lk.10:2). And the Apostle Paul wrote: *"How, then, can they call on the one in whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can they preach unless they are sent?"* No one has the right to hear the gospel twice until everyone has had the opportunity to hear it once! The collection of money from the Churches in Macedonia and Achaia for the Church in Jerusalem was a missionary collection for overseas work! We are called to give to extend the gospel.

A **final motive** for giving that I would like to mention is that **giving enriches the giver**. Now, there are people in many quarters of the Church today who say "Give your \$, and you will get back more from God." Give in order that you'll get. But this misses the whole point of what Scripture says with respect to giving. We give not because of what we will get in return, but because of what we **become** through our giving. The dividends and benefits are not material, but spiritual in nature. While it is true that one cannot outgive God, His 1st concern for us is not that we lay up treasure here on earth, but that we lay up treasure in heaven.

Senator Mark Hatfield has told a story that Mother Teresa of Calcutta told him when he visited her in 1974. She related to him how once she had gone to a home to take a portion of rice, and the mother of the household shared with her that her family of 5 had not eaten in 3 days. As Mother Teresa was giving the woman enough rice for her family, she noticed the woman taking a portion of her allocation and placing it in another container. Somewhat puzzled, Mother Teresa asked her what she was doing. The woman responded by explaining that her neighbor's family had not eaten for 3 days either, and that she wanted to share her rice with them. The perceptive and profound observation Mother Teresa made was this: *"I could have give her a double portion of rice, but I did not want to deny this family the blessing of sharing."* Giving enriches the giver.

III. The Measure of Christian Giving.

The Macedonian Churches, those in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, were churches who were afflicted with suffering, and this suffering was the result of both poverty and persecution. And accordingly, in Paul's epistles to the Thessalonians and the Phil. we find that there is no warning against the temptations of wealth and no emphasis on the responsibilities of the rich. Yet they gave generously to the Church in Jerusalem.

The example of the Macedonians is a practical proof that true generosity is not the prerogative of those who enjoy an adequacy of means. Indeed, the most

genuine liberality is frequently displayed by those who have the least to give. Christian giving is not estimated in terms of quantity but of sacrifice. And so it is that the widow who placed her 2 pennies into the temple offering is the one who gave more than all the others put together, because they gave *"out of their abundance, but she gave out of her poverty, giving everything she had"* (Mk.12:31ff.). Philip E. Hughes has written, "In the case of the Macedonian Churches, the fires of affliction and poverty had uncovered and refined the precious ore of joy and generosity."

In the passage before us, nowhere is the quantity to be contributed even mentioned, for that is beside the point. One individual may without inconvenience be able to give an amount which another can raise only at the cost of great self-sacrifice. But it is the spirit of devoted and single-minded generosity that matters, and that alone is the measure God uses to assess the act of one's giving. What He weighs is not the outward amount, but the inward motivation, or as Paul puts it here, *"the genuineness of your love"* (v.8).

I ask you this morning, are you giving to the Lord in ways that are easy and convenient for you, or are you giving sacrificially. What might God call you to forgo in order to give sacrificially to His work in the world. This is something that I struggle with personally, but I know that I need to ask myself the hard questions in order that I may be sure that I am seeking the Lord's will for my life and for my family in this area of giving.

IV. The Model for Christian Giving.

Ultimately the supreme argument for Christian liberality is the self-giving, self-impooverishment of the Son of God on our behalf. When one thinks of the "last of the bigtime spenders," one normally thinks of Diamond Jim Brady, or Cornelius Vanderbilt, or John D. Rockefeller, Bill Gates, or Howard Hughes, or maybe Ross Perot. But none of these people put together ever gave of themselves as much as did the Son of God. Our passage says: *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich"* (v.9).

Paul introduces this verse with the declaration, "You know." It was something with which the Corinthian believers were well acquainted.

And then he goes on to say, *"Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor."* The wealth and poverty of Christ.

- It was not the fact that Jesus was born in a manger in a stable -- a feeding trough for animals -- that makes this so remarkable.
- It was not His life as a peasant boy or that He grew up a carpenter.
- It was not that when He left His mother's home He had no place to lay His head.

• It was not even because of the fact that He died without a single possession, and even the clothes on His back were stripped off Him by the soldiers in charge of His execution. • What makes Jesus the last of the bigtime spenders was the fact that -He laid aside His glory in heaven
-and put on the flesh of a human
-and lived here on the earth
-and died the sinner's death on the cross of Calvary for you and for me.
-He was very God of very God, through Whom all things were created.

He was one with the Father, and yet as Philippians 2 tells us: *"He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."* The Gk. word here in our passage which is translated poverty is the word *πτωκος*. It literally means total, abject poverty -- a humiliating and wretched poverty. From the highest heaven Christ descended to Calvary and the grave. None was richer than He; none became poorer than He. He was like Moses who renounced the luxury of the palace in order to serve his brothers and sisters.

And Paul explains to the Corinthians that it was *"for your sakes"* that He did this. Christ's sacrifice was intensely personal. As Paul writes, it was all, *"so that you through His poverty might become rich."* What the Apostle is trying to help the Corinthian believers realize is that if Christ did all this for me, then nothing I give or do for Him can be too much. Such love constrains me, for I was redeemed at an incalculable cost. I am not longer my own; I've been bought with a price. All that was mine is now His; He is free to use it according to His divine purposes.

And haven't you and I been enriched by His poverty. Through the shed blood of Jesus the sackcloth of our sins has been torn to shreds. Through that blood we have cast away the rags of our iniquity in order that we might be clothed with the royal robes of righteousness and immortality. He showed Himself poor so that He might make available to us the riches of heaven.

Conclusion/Application:

The question I leave with you this morning is this: "What is going to be your response to God's love that has been poured out on you?" A. Plummer has written: *"Here is the supreme incentive to benevolence: to be willing and eager to give up all to serve others."* The love of Christ is so magnanimous in its motive and so self-sacrificing in its expression that it must be an active force in the believer's heart. Someone has said, *"As long as the Church is alive it is going to cost time and money. When it dies, it won't cost us another minute or another penny."* But which of these two alternatives would you like the case to be? Amen.