



Seven Ways Of Giving

by Rev. Fred Wideman

Never in my lifetime have I witnessed our country so preoccupied with money. Carelessness and greed over a period of time have shrunk much of the material value on which our country was planning for the future.

Growing unemployment, failed mortgages and foreclosures, financial institutions in array, and dwindled pension funds have created more than a little anxiety.

I grew up in a culture that rarely talked about money. When people did talk about money it was usually in the negative. Those were the post WW2 days. The economy was steadily growing. Most everything seemed to be getting a little bigger and a little better. But the people leading this economic boom grew up in a different day. They witnessed the Great Depression and to this day can still remember the fear.

Probably unintentionally, but fairly effectively, my friends and I were taught to be afraid of losing money. My great grandmother used to say, “A fool and his money will soon part.” If you were not careful you would end up in the “poor house.” No one ever told me where the poor house was. But I knew I did not want to go there. I heard about one man who was so poor he could afford only one pair of pants. Those pants had grown so thin he could sit on a dime and tell you whether it was heads or tails.

Too many conversations about money are filled with the emotions of shame and fear. I remember one night early in my marriage my wife and I were having one of those loud discussions. We never fought but often had loud discussions. Most all of those loud discussions revolved around money. We went to bed angry.

I heard the door open and the pitter patter of little feet and coins jingling on the dresser where I kept my change.

“Who is it?” I asked.

My five year old son said, “It’s me, daddy.”

“You are not taking any of daddy’s money, are you?” I asked.

“Oh, no, daddy. I heard you and mommy say you did not have much money, and I am giving you some of mine. I have lots of money,” he said as he emptied his piggy bank on my dresser.

I wanted to cry. I still want to cry when I think of how much fear and shame I carried in me when it came to the handling of money. My guess is that there are so many people today who are filled with fear and shame when it comes to dealing with money. Fear and shame are terrible teachers. Fear and shame do not lead to generosity, but rather to self protection. What our world needs today is what our Church needs as well: a good theology of money.

Biblical Text
2 Corinthians 8, 2 Corinthians 9:6 -7



In our text from 2 Corinthians 8 Paul shares some of his theology of money. You can identify at least six different ways or motivations for giving in Paul's theology of money. The context for Paul's appeal to the Corinthian Church was a special offering for the poor in Jerusalem. The Corinthian people apparently thought very highly of themselves. They gave themselves high grades in spirituality. But Paul gave them low grades in generosity. They talked big, but their follow through was weak. And Paul wrote to challenge them. Apparently he pulled out all his motivational appeals for this important offering.

First, Paul encouraged them to give comparatively. This is an interesting motivation that tends to engage the competitive spirit in all of us. One church was entering a capital campaign. The pastor went to visit one of the members, a banker. When asked if he had decided how much he could contribute the banker said, "My wife and I have prayed and decided to give \$25,000."

The pastor thanked him and went to another member who also was a banker. He said, "Mr. Smith and his wife have decided to give \$25,000. Have you and your wife decided yet?"

The banker thought a moment and said, "Well, I am sure my wife and I could give at least \$30,000." The pastor went back to the first banker and shared that this banker had pledged \$30,000. And he raised his pledge to \$35,000. Before the day was over the pastor had received over \$80,000 from the two bankers. That is the motivation of comparative giving.

Paul said to the very proud Corinthian Church, "Let me tell about those poor Macedonians. During a severe ordeal of affliction their abundant joy and extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. They voluntarily gave according to the means and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints..." (2 Cor 8:2-4)

To witness your neighbor begging to be a part of a special offering would provoke most of us, especially if we knew our neighbor was experiencing hard times. Paul tapped into that motivation of comparative giving for the sake of Christ and the poor.

A second motivation Paul taps is human desire. LSU once had a rather famous basketball coach named Dale Brown. He was the coach who recruited the famous class of Shaquille O'Neil, Chris Jackson, and Stanley Roberts. Dale Brown will be better remembered, however, for taking a much lesser talented team all the way to the Final Four. Dale Brown was a preacher. His power sermon was desire. He knew if he could touch deep down into the desire of each player, they might exceed all expectations and win victories for which no one would give them a chance.

Paul uses a similar motivation but a different word. He says, "If the eagerness is there the gift is acceptable." People will usually do what they want to do. They will usually not do what they do not want to do. Eagerness has to do with desire, maybe even passion. It is probably a good thing on a regular basis for the followers of Jesus to check their eagerness level in serving and giving to the cause that is greater than us. The church that is eager to accomplish the mission of Christ will make a difference in the world.

A third way of motivation for giving is simply the logic of giving. Paul says that the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." (2 Corinthians 9:6) Some people are highly motivated by lessons in life that

simply make good sense. It makes good sense that if you want to receive a good harvest for yourself and others, you will want to make sure you are sowing bountifully. The way we give does not end in the gift. Our giving is an investment, an investment that receives a return.

We often hear the term bounty and think only the reward. Here Paul uses bounty to describe the way we should give and invest. We have all had much invested in us by God. Our return is our thanksgiving, our bountiful sowing in the mission of God. It all makes sense.

Paul then gave them a fourth way of giving. He told them to give proportionately. You should give according to what you have, not according to what you do not have. This kind of giving calls not for equal gifts but equal sacrifice. This is the natural kind of giving that flows from the understanding that all things belong and will eventually return to God. Some people have the extraordinary gift of growing money. As they understand that it belongs to God, they begin to develop the extraordinary gift of giving money.

I hear a lot of conversation today about just how much, what percentage of income a person should be giving. Is a tithe ten percent before or after taxes? Should I give all ten percent to the church or share it with other charities? Sometimes we get so nit picking and legalistic. John Wesley challenged such thinking as being stingy. Wesley encouraged proportionate giving, which for some may be much more than ten percent of income. As Paul said, it is a question of a fair balance between one person's abundance and another person's need. When is enough, enough?

A fifth way of giving is cheerfully. Paul says that God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7) And the whole church says, "Amen." But I have yet to meet a church that would refuse a gift of money from one not so cheerful. Most churches say, "Any way we can get it." However, there does seem to be an impact made in the whole environment when the gift is a cheerful donation rather than a painful extraction.

One church had a congregational meeting to discuss raising some money to repair the facilities. A wealthy gentleman dressed in his expensive suit rose to speak. He said, "I am not convinced that we need to be spending any money. These facilities are fine just the way they are." Suddenly a piece of ceiling tile broke loose, fell and hit the gentleman right on the head. He dusted himself off, looked up and said, "Maybe it is a bit worse than I thought. My wife and I will give \$5000." A dear lady on the front row put her hands together and prayed, "Please, Lord, hit him one more time."

A sixth way of giving for Paul was to give generously. Paul mentioned how the grace of God and the difficult predicament of the Macedonians have overflowed in a wealth of generosity. He went on to speak of Jesus, "For you know the generous act 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."

People respond differently to life. Some people gain wealth and become selfish. Others become generous. Some people who have been hurt in life will close in around themselves and become very selfish and self-protecting. Others will learn from their pain and loss something of the greater value of life and will become more generous. It is not a matter of circumstances that come our way, but how we respond to them. Followers of Jesus have before them the greatest example of how to give whether in the presence of abundance or pain and loss. Easter people are like that.

Finally, the seventh way of giving is gratefully. Gratitude is really the essence of our Christian ethic. Christians do not simply calculate the way they behave to reap the greatest gain. We decide in situations what action will be the most appropriate response to grace, the grace we have seen and received in Christ. That may mean we receive a gain, or it could mean we make a sacrifice.

We respond to God. We do not react in fear. We love because Christ first loved us. We give because God so loved the world that God gave. We bless God and we bless others because that is the appropriate response to having been blessed. Our lives are made to be a perpetual thanksgiving. Receiving freely and giving freely is the rhythm of a grateful life, a rhythm that keeps us free from fear and free for God. †

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