

# Stewardship Forum

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## Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Sermon Library

**Title: 10 Principles of Christian Giving (2 Corinthians 8 & 9)**

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Well, Christian giving is an eminently appropriate subject on a gift day. For I reckon that there isn't a single Christian enterprise throughout the world that is not hindered and hampered by lack of funds. Only this last week I received two letters from two different Christian organisations both of which are threatened with closure unless their income dramatically increases.

Now there is no need for us to be embarrassed that we should talk about Christian giving in the midst of a service of Christian worship because giving is an aspect of our worship. In worship we're offering ourselves to God and we cannot do that if we withhold our money. The Apostle Paul gives us a superb example of this. He appealed to the Greek churches in Northern Greece, what we call Macedonia, and in Southern Greece, what we call Achaia. He appealed to them to give generously for the benefit of their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters in Judea. It's extraordinary that he should give so much space to this seemingly mundane matter, but of course, Paul did not regard it as mundane because he saw Christian giving in relation to the grace of God and the cross of Christ and unity of the Spirit in the church. It's a wonderful thing to grasp – Paul's combination of great Christian doctrines, great Christian Trinitarian doctrines on the one hand and practical common sense on the other.

My text today, as you will have noticed, is 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9 and I think you would find it helpful to turn to your bibles.

I want to try and outline from this passage 10 vital principles of Christian giving.

1. So here is the first principle. Christian giving is an expression of the grace of God. Paul doesn't begin in chapter 8 with the generosity of the Macedonian church. He begins rather with the generosity of God that lies behind the generosity of the Macedonian church, because grace is another word for generosity. And to call God a gracious God is to call him a generous God and he is at work in his people to make us generous too. So Christian giving is an outflow of the generosity of God himself.

We move onto verse 6 where he urges Titus to complete what he had begun in Corinth a little while ago. What is that? Well, the end of vs. 6: 'this act of grace'. Grace is repeated. So this is where Paul begins, with the grace of God in the Macedonian church and the grace of God in the Corinthian church down south. Christian generosity is an outworking of the generosity of God.

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0. Christian giving can be a charisma – that is a gift of the Spirit vs. 7. ‘Just as you excel in everything, in the gift of faith, the gift of speech, the gift of knowledge etc... also excel in this gift of giving.’ So giving is a charisma – a gift of the Spirit of God and a much neglected one. It’s interesting that in Romans 12 when Paul is giving one of his several lists of charismata, gifts of the Spirit, one of them is contributing to the needs of others. I sometimes say that I’ve never yet heard any Christian pray to be given that spiritual gift – to give – so why do we emphasise this? Well, let me explain further.

All Christians are called to evangelism – to share the gospel with others. But some are given the gift of the evangelist. Again, all Christians are called to exercise pastoral care for others in the Christian congregation, but some are given the gift of the pastor, are called to be pastors. Similarly, all Christians are called to be generous and some are given the gift of generosity. Because they’ve been endowed with a remarkable degree of wealth, they have a particular responsibility to stewardship of this wealth, with which they have been entrusted.

3. Thirdly, it is inspired by the cross. Chapter 8 vs. 9. ‘You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. For though he was rich for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty, might become rich.’

Well you notice another reference to grace – not now to the grace of God at work in us, but to the grace of God revealed in the cross of Christ challenging us to similar self-sacrifice. Because you notice perhaps that poverty and riches are both mentioned twice. Because above poverty, he renounced his riches so that through his poverty, we might become rich – not materially. If you read this passage carefully, you’ll see that it’s very clear that the poverty and the riches that are being talked about here are spiritual. The poverty of Christ – how did he impoverish himself? Answer: in the Incarnation, in his sufferings, in his sin-bearing death on the cross. And what are the riches that he gives us? Answer: Salvation, with all its attended riches.

4. Fourthly, Christian giving is proportionate giving. Vs 10-12. ‘Last year (vs. 10) you were the first both to give and to desire to give. Now (vs. 11) finish what you began according to your means.’ So Christian giving is proportionate giving. The eager willingness comes first and if that is there, the gift is acceptable according to what the giver has and not according to what the giver has not. It’s proportionate to our income and our wealth.

Now this expression ‘from each according to his means’ reminds me immediately of two verses in the book of Acts. In Acts 11 the members of the church in Antioch gave ‘each according to his ability’. In Acts 2 and 4 we read that the members of the church in Jerusalem gave ‘to each according to his need’. Do those words ring a bell with anybody here? They are a plain quotation from Karl Marx! Marx called for a society – this is in a speech called his Critique of the Gotha Programme, dating from 1875 – Marx called for a society which could inscribe on its banners, ‘from each according to his ability to each

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according to his need'. I've often wondered, "Where did Marx get those words from?" Well, he got them from the Bible. He got them from the book of Acts. So whatever our political and economic convictions may be, these principles are biblical principles to which we should hold fast. Christian giving is proportionate giving: from each according to his ability to each according to his need. Marx took them from the New Testament.

- Christian giving contributes to equality. Voss. 13-15. 'Our desire' Paul writes, 'is not that others may be relieved while you are hard-pressed but that there might be equality'. Next verse 14, 'at present your plenty will supply their need so that maybe later their plenty will supply your need and then there will be equality. Isn't that remarkable? A repetition of the phrase about equality. Paul puts the affluence of some Christians alongside the want of others and then he calls for an adjustment, an easing of want by affluence. And twice he says this is with a view to *issortase* which is the Greek word which can mean equality, it can also mean justice. And Christians are very concerned for social justice. What is it? The equality that he's talking about first is not egalitarianism. It is not God's purpose that everybody is identical with everybody else as if we've been mass-produced in a celestial factory. No on the contrary, God's purpose is not that every body receives an identical wage and lives in an identical home, equipped with identical furniture, wears identical clothing and eats identical food. No our Christian doctrine of creation should have delivered us from that mistake, from any vision of a colourless uniformity. God the Creator has not cloned us. We are not identical. We're very different, different in temperament, personality, physique, etc, by creation. So what is it that he is talking about?

The equality that we see begins with the equality of educational opportunity. Christians have been in the forefront of those demanding literacy and education for everybody. For the girls as well as the boys, for the poor as well as the rich. To educate – the Latin word *educaræ* – is to lead people out into the fullness of their created potential. So that they become everything which God intends them to be. Equal educational opportunity means that not every child is sent to the university, but that every child capable of benefiting from a university education is sent there. It is a question of justice and we should be in the forefront of those demanding justice in educational opportunity. Then there is one other meaning that equality has. It abolishes extreme social disparity. You all know the name of Julius Nearing. He was President of Tanzania. He was a socialist, he was also a Roman Catholic who had benefited a great deal from the social encyclicals of the Pope and in his famous Arroucha Declaration Julius Nearing said that he wanted to build a Tanzania – listen carefully – in which no man is ashamed of his poverty in the light of another man's affluence and that no man has to be ashamed of his affluence in the light of another's poverty. In other words, if we find that we are embarrassed either to visit other people in their home or to invite them to visit us in our home because of the disparity of economic lifestyles, then the difference is too great. Something is wrong. The inequality is too great. It has broken the Christian fellowship. So there needs to be a measure of equalisation in one or other direction, or maybe in both. So Christian giving contributes to equality.

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- Christian giving must be carefully supervised. The handling of money is a very risky business. It has often been mishandled and religion has too often been commercialised and made indeed the opium of the people. But Paul is evidently

aware of these dangers so look what he says in vs. 20. 'We want to avoid any criticism of the way in which we administer this gift. Vs 21 'We are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also the eyes of men. We are concerned that is not only to do right but to be seen to do right.'

So what steps did Paul take to ensure this? Well, first of all he decided not to handle the money himself. He appointed Titus to make the necessary arrangements and with Titus a couple of other brothers came to Corinth who had been chosen by the churches, not by Paul, but by the churches, and they'd been chosen because the churches had confidence in their integrity. In our day, we would be very wise to take similar precautions in the handling of money. I, for one, am profoundly grateful for Dr Billy Graham, because he had the wisdom and integrity never to handle the finances of his own organisation. And moreover he has always accepted a fixed salary and has never taken what are sometimes called 'love offerings'. In addition he has ensured that the audited accounts of every one of his crusades are published in the newspapers as soon as possible after the crusade is over. Now this principle you know is very relevant to what we're thinking about on World Need Sunday because there are some of us who are hesitant to give to Third World causes because we are afraid that our money will never get there and be used for the purposes to which we intend it. That's why Tear Fund has been so wise in working through its overseas partners. Tear Fund has an enormous number of partners who receive and supervise the distribution of the money so that we may give with confidence.

- Christian giving can be stimulated by a little friendly competition. I don't know if you've noticed that, but in this passage, Paul sets the North (that is Macedonia in Greece) and the South (that is Achaia including Corinth), these two churches against one another so that they may stimulate one another. So first he says he has boasted of the generosity of the South in order to stimulate the North to give generously as well. But now he urges the South to give generously so that the North will not be disappointed in them when their representatives come down. I don't know if you get that, it may be a bit complicated. But let me put it like this – it is delightful that the good Apostle Paul should play off the North and the South against one another in Greece. He boasts of each to the other in order to stimulate the generosity of both. Now it's true that competition is a dangerous game to play, especially if it involves the publication of the names of donors and of the amount of their donations. But at least these verses provide a biblical base for the concept of matching grants. You know what a matching grant is, don't you? You write to Tear Fund and you say, I'll give you £10,000 for this that and the other on condition that you find somebody else who will give another £10,000 and then your gift is doubled. Now I think there is biblical warrant for this here. We can all be stimulated to greater generosity by the known generosity of others.
- Christian giving resembles a harvest. Chapter 9:6-11. In fact there are two harvest principles here. The first is that we reap what we sow. Vs 6 if we sow sparingly we

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will reap sparingly, but if we sow generously we will reap generously. That leads us to the second principle which is that what we reap in the harvest is not only intended for our immediate eating and the alleviation of our hunger but is also intended for future sowing when the next season comes round. So the God of the harvest is concerned not only to meet our most immediate need but to make

provision for the future in the next season. I hope that's clear. So Paul is not preaching a prosperity gospel. I hope there is nobody here who has fallen for that false gospel called the Prosperity Gospel that tells us that if you're faithful you can become wealthy, get a new car an aeroplane and all the rest. It is a false gospel and we need to have the courage to reject it. But I want to ask you to notice that it is forbidden here in vs. 11. Now of course you may want to say that the verse begins "It's God's will that you may be made rich"! And how many people have taken those few words out of their context and tried to defend the Prosperity Gospel that His will is that we should become rich. But why does he want us to become rich? Look at the rest of the verse. He says you will be made rich in order that you may be generous. Not that you may be rich in order to spend the money on your own affluent living, but that you may receive riches in order to give them away. That's the only reason why we pray that we may become rich because then we've got more to give to others. And that's the principle of the harvest.

- Christian giving has symbolic significance. There is more in it than meets the eye vs. 9-11. Paul is quite clear about this. He looks beyond the mere transfer of cash from one church to another to what this gift represents or symbolises. The significance of Paul's collection was not just geographical – the transfer from Greece to Judea; it was not just economical, a transfer from the rich to the poor. It was theological – a transfer from gentile Christians to Jewish Christians out of solidarity with the poor. So Paul's collection was a deliberate self-conscious symbol of Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ. Now this, you know, is what Paul called the mystery that had been revealed to him among the Apostles. Namely that Jews and Gentiles would be admitted on equal terms into the Christian community or the Body of Christ. They would be equally heirs, equally members of the same Body, equally inheritors of the same promises, and in order to demonstrate that truth for which in the end Paul was imprisoned he organised that collection. In order to demonstrate that Gentile Christians loved Jewish Christians and want to serve them. The Jews had brought to the Gentiles great spiritual blessings: the Messiah - salvation comes from the Jews, the Scriptures - Old Testament Scriptures come from the Jews. We Gentiles owe an enormous debt to the Jews, and because we owe them spiritually, it's good that we should share with them materially. And Gentile Christians can support Jews as the Jews have benefited the Gentiles. I hope that's clear. And in a very similar way, our Christian giving can be a question of theology as well as of economics. Our gift can be a symbol of the support of the particular Christian charitable organisation that we are supporting. Take these street kids now in Durban. Supposing you decide to give a gift to them – you know what you're doing. You're not just transferring cash. You're saying that every street kid in Durban has been created in the image of God and has an intrinsic value and worth on account of which I'm wanting to serve them. You see, there's theology behind your gift. It is symbolical.

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- Christian giving promotes thanksgiving to God. Vs 11: 'Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God (vs. 12) it overflows in many expressions of thanksgiving to God. (vs. 13) 'Men will praise God for your confession of obedience'. And vs. 15 'Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift'. Now this is a crucial test as to whether our giving is authentically Christian or not. Truly Christian giving leads people not to thank us the donors but to thank God for his grace.

Now let me conclude. Here are ten principles of Christian giving.

- It's an expression of the grace of God.
- It's a charisma.
- It's inspired by the cross.
- It's proportionate to our wealth.
- It contributes to equality.
- It must be carefully supervised.
- It can be stimulated by competition.
- It resembles a harvest.
- It has symbolic significance.
- It promotes thanksgiving to God.

It is amazing. How much is involved in the simple act of Christian giving. On the one hand, these great Trinitarian doctrines are involved: the Grace of God, the Cross of Christ, and the Unity of the Spirit. And on the other, the practical wisdom of an apostle of Jesus Christ. Friends, I very much hope that as a result of this biblical teaching all of us will raise our understanding and our standards of Christian giving. I very much hope that we will be persuaded to give more systematically, more sacrificially, and more generously. I for one, if I may venture to be personal as I finish, was so overwhelmed by what I knew I was going to say to you today that I reviewed my own giving yesterday. I stopped preparing in order to do it. Because before I have preached this sermon to you, I preached it yesterday to myself. And just in the same way that I have reviewed my giving, I venture to hope that you will review yours. And let us be obedient to this wonderful teaching of the Apostle Paul.