

**GOOD GIVING****2 CORINTHIANS 8 & 9**

There's a story about a congregation that held a business meeting to discuss some much needed repairs to their church building. The pastor gave an emotional description of the facility's dire condition as well as a stirring appeal for sacrificial gifts. Everyone was surprised, however, when a church member with a well-deserved reputation for being miserly stood up and offered to start the fund with a \$50 contribution. As he was speaking, a chunk of plaster fell from the ceiling and hit him right on the top of his head. A trifle dazed, he said, "I'd better make that gift \$100." Just then, a voice rang out from the back of the room: "Hit him again, Lord! Hit him again!"

Does the Lord have to "hit" you, so to speak, to get your attention in the area of giving? I hope not. But our financial giving to the Lord and His work is indeed a very important part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It's also part and parcel of what it means to live a cruciform or a cross-shaped life. That's the overarching, mega theme of our study of 2 Corinthians. When your life and mine resembles Jesus or looks like Jesus – in terms of our actions, our attitudes, how we treat other people, or how we go about our life in almost any area of it - it's cruciform or cross-shaped. Most followers of Jesus need to grow or develop in the area of financial giving – myself included. Too many of us are content to let other followers of Jesus carry too much of the giving load – be it giving our money faithfully as well as giving our time and talents to the Lord's work. Too many of us give the Lord a tip rather than a tithe. Too many of us are content to remain spiritual babies for too long in this area. We need to grow up. Sadly, too many of us are missing the spiritual rewards faithful giving produces in our lives.

Our Scripture text today is found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. We aren't going to read both chapters in their entirety. Instead, let's read 8:1-15 and 9:1-6. Someone has called these two chapters "the longest fund-raising appeal in the Bible." Paul, the great Christian leader who founded the church in Corinth, was raising money to help poor, starving Jewish Christians in and around Jerusalem. Famine had struck that part of the world and some of God's people were in dire straits. This special offering was a very important project for Paul for several years. He invited several churches he had founded to contribute to this special offering. Paul likely had another agenda beyond just alleviating human suffering. The majority of the new believers in the churches Paul had founded were Gentiles or non-Jews. The defining issue for Christians in the first century was the sometimes testy relationship between ethnically Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers. Paul wanted to use this offering to demonstrate the essential unity both groups enjoyed in Jesus. After all, the Gentile believers owed their Jewish brothers and sisters a debt. How so? Jewish believers first sent or brought the Gospel to the Gentiles. It was appropriate, then, for Gentile believers to share a financial gift with their spiritual older brothers – Jewish Christians. Paul hoped such a gift could heal some unfortunate divisions.

I find at least five clear cut principles in these two chapters that make our financial giving to the Lord acceptable. Now, right there some of us might balk. We might think, "Acceptable? Really! Isn't any and all giving to the Lord acceptable? Shouldn't God be

pleased with and grateful for anything I give Him financially?” The answer is no. “Can I give financially to the Lord and His work in an unacceptable way?” The answer is yes! Acceptable giving is good giving. Acceptable giving is cruciform or cross-shaped. Several English translations use that word “acceptable” or “accept” in what we read today. For example, “Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly. And give according to what you have, not what you don’t have.” (2 Cor 8:12 NLT) Another version puts it like this, “After all, the important thing is to be willing to give as much as we can—that is what God accepts.” (2 Cor 8:12 JBP) So, if God finds some financial giving acceptable here, it implies – doesn’t it? - there’s a kind of financial giving that is not acceptable to Him. With that in mind, then, let’s see what these verses tell us about financial giving that’s truly acceptable to God.

### **ACCEPTABLE GIVING IS PASSIONATE.**

God wants us to be passionate about following Him. True, our feelings may not be the most important part of our faith, but God doesn’t have much use for lukewarm believers either. If we never get passionate or feel passion about who Jesus is, what He’s done for us, and what we can do to help build His Kingdom, our wills never get in gear and we end up being of little use to God. Passion ought to show up in what we give financially and how we give it. What makes giving passionate? Passionate giving is, first of all, intensely personal. We give because we love Jesus. Referring to other Christians in other churches, Paul wrote here, “They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us....” (2 Cor 8:5 NLT) Do you hear the passion in that description? Because they had surrendered to Jesus as Lord first and foremost, they were now passionately eager to give. Acceptable giving always involves giving yourself first to the Lord.

Passionate giving is, secondly, generous to the point of being sacrificial. “Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous.” (2 Cor 9:11 NLT) You know you’re giving is generous precisely because it’s sacrificial. “They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will.” (2 Cor 8:3 NLT) Those believers were themselves being persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Few, if any, were well-off financially. Most of them were financially poor themselves. But neither personal adversity nor personal poverty became an excuse not to give. Passion for Jesus gave birth to generous and sacrificial financial giving.

A few years ago a group of American Christians was in Nanjing, China. On Sunday they visited various churches in the city. An older Chinese woman, a Mrs. Chang, now living in Los Angeles chose to visit a church across the river from Nanjing. It was a poor church composed of farmers. The 900 who were present for the service wanted to hear a word from their sister from the United States, so Mrs. Chang brought greetings from her church in Los Angeles. She told how the Lord had added many to their church and how they were currently building a large new addition. Then after a word of blessing for

this Chinese church hosting her, she took her seat. At the close of the worship time, Mrs. Chang was called back to the front. The pastor said her words had thrilled their hearts that day. They wanted her to have the morning offering – all of it - to help with the new building in Los Angeles — about \$140. Passionate joy welled up into generosity which resulted in sacrifice. They gave beyond their ability.

Passionate giving is, thirdly, voluntary. Paul was careful not to manipulate or coerce anyone when it came to giving. “And they did it of their own free will... I am not commanding you to do this.” (2 Cor 8:3, 8 NLT) “You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure. ‘For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.’” (2 Cor 9:7 NLT) You might know the word “cheerfully” there is the Greek word *hilaros* from which we get the English word “hilarious.” Have you ever felt hilarious about putting your offering in the box out there on Sunday morning or clicking it on its way online? Acceptable giving is passionate. Then...

### **ACCEPTABLE GIVING IS PLANNED.**

For too many of us giving to the Lord’s work is haphazard. God’s Word says, “You must each decide in your heart how much to give.” (2 Cor 9:7 NLT). Elsewhere Paul writes, “On the first day of each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. Don’t wait until I get there and then try to collect it all at once.” (1 Cor 16:2 NLT) Both those verses imply that acceptable giving is thoughtful. It’s not a spur of the moment, belching forth of spontaneity. Spontaneity is great in some things, but too many of us use it as an excuse not to plan our giving to the Lord and His work. If you are serious about tithing to the Lord, you will never accomplish it spontaneously. Tithing usually represents a large enough amount of money for any of us that you have to make a plan to give it if you are actually going to give it. Tithing never happens spontaneously.

But didn’t Jesus encourage spontaneous giving? After all, He did say, “But when you give to someone in need, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. Give your gifts in private, and your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.” (Matt 6:3-4 NLT) The context of Jesus’ words shows the issue He addressed there was confidentiality not spontaneity. Jesus told us it’s better to help someone in need in a hidden, even secretive way, rather than announcing it to the neighborhood. By the way, we try to practice that principle of confidentiality here. I don’t know what anyone gives. The only people who know what you give financially are God, you, and one or two people in our congregation who provide you with a record of giving at the end of the year. Not much in life gets accomplished without a plan. Not much happens in following Jesus without an intentional plan you work out with the Holy Spirit. Acceptable giving is planned.

### **ACCEPTABLE GIVING IS PROPORTIONATE.**

We find that principle as early as the fifth book of the Bible. “All must give as they are able, according to the blessings given to them by the LORD your God.” (Dt 16:17 NLT) That very same principle is repeated in our text today. “For I can testify that they gave

not only what they could afford, but far more.... Give in proportion to what you have.... On the first day of each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned.” (2 Cor 8:3, 11; 1 Cor 16:2 NLT) God doesn't expect us to give exactly the same amount of money to His work. Those who have more should give more. Those who have less will have less to give. But both gifts can be considered generous because they're proportionate. The amounts will differ in size, but they can be equal in commitment and sacrifice. Paul writes, “Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality.” (2 Cor 8:13 NLT) Equality of sacrifice and commitment is what the Lord is after in our giving. Not a match in the quantity of our gift, but in its quality.

Does the name Dr. Robert Cade strike a bell? He was a research physician at the University of Florida. In 1965 he was asked why football players lose so much weight during extended practices and games. That question led to research that resulted in Dr. Cade developing a drink designed to replenish the fluids lost during intense exercise. He even named it after the Florida football team: Gatorade! Originally produced and marketed by Stokely-Van Camp, it's now owned by Pepsi. Within the United States, Gatorade accounts for approximately 75% market share in the sports drink category. As you might imagine, royalties from Gatorade made Robert Cade a very wealthy man! But until his death in 2007, Dr. Cade apparently lived in the same house in Gainesville, preferring to use his enormous wealth to help others. He supported Vietnamese boat people, paid the medical bills of needy patients, funded research for himself and others, and helped pay the educational costs of medical students. When he was asked about it, he said, “God has blessed me in all kinds of ways – including a big income. In the book of Deuteronomy, God tells the Israelites a man should give as he is blessed. I think I am duty bound to do as He suggests.”

The Bible is very clear about proportion. It's called the tithe – 10% of our income goes to the Lord and His work as a minimum. Your 10% won't be my 10%, but if we're each giving at least 10% we are both giving proportionately. Again, it's God inspiring Paul's writing here who suggests in our text today that our financial gifts can be acceptable or unacceptable. God doesn't need your tips. God's doesn't need your charity. God doesn't need your financial leftovers. But God does want your gratitude. God does want your participation in His work. God does want your obedience. I don't know what you're giving. But God does. You don't answer to me. But you do answer to God. If you're not giving at least 10% of your income to the Lord, please go off and explain to Him why He should find it acceptable. If you can convince Him why He should find it acceptable, OK. Good luck with that, by the way. Here's another principle in giving.

### **ACCEPTABLE GIVING IS PROGRESSIVE.**

That simply means financial giving to the Lord and His work is something you can get better at and grow in. You can develop or improve in giving. Isn't that the assumption when Paul writes, “Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving”? (2 Cor 8:7 NLT) Do you still pray exactly the same

way you prayed when you were a child or when you first became a follower of Jesus? Hasn't how you pray and what you pray for matured? Is your knowledge of the Bible exactly the same as it was when you were a teenager or when you first became a disciple of Jesus? Don't you understand more about God and His Word now? In the same way, haven't you moved beyond giving just a few dollars to the Lord believing it's somehow acceptable to Him? Just like any other area of our lives, God expects us to mature in our financial giving and to get better at it.

Again, I don't know what anyone actually gives financially to the Lord's work here. But I know too many of us are giving \$5 or \$10 a week if that. If that amount represents a tithe of your income, then many of us are only making \$50 or \$100 a week. It's time for some of us to make our financial giving a matter of spiritual growth. I used to suggest to people that they take a gradual approach to tithing. You know, right now you're only giving 2% of your income, so increase it 3%, then next year to 4%, and so on until you eventually get to 10%. But if tithing is God's standard – the starting point of our giving and not the ultimate goal - and it's a matter of obedience, is that really the right approach? What if I said to someone, "You know, God's standard for telling the truth is pretty clear, but you're not there yet. Let me suggest that you gradually work toward telling the truth. Why don't you reduce your lying by one lie per week until you eventually tell the truth all the time?" What would you think of such advice? What I challenge people to do now is to obey the Lord and trust Him for the outcome. Swallow that big lump of fear in your throat, and just tithe! Just do it because God said to do it. God invited us to test Him in the area of the tithe, so do it and see what happens.

By the same token, don't assume - those of you in our midst who are tithers – that 10% is all God ever expects from you. Tithing is the beginning point of financial giving to the Lord not the ultimate goal. Where would God have you – tither - progress, grow, develop, and get better at financial giving? I think of the example of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church. When he only made 30 British pounds a year, he lived on 28 and gave 2 to the Lord's work. Then he made 60 pounds, but he knew he could live on 28, so he gave away 32 pounds. The next year his income rose to 90 pounds, but he still lived on 28 and gave away the rest. Doesn't that tell you all you need to know about John Wesley's commitment to Jesus? Acceptable giving is progressive.

### **ACCEPTABLE GIVING PAYS.**

God promises a reward to those who give acceptably. It's clearly implied right here. "Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop." (2 Cor 9:6 NLT) I've heard it referred to as the law of spiritual action and reaction. We can never out give God. He is no one's debtor. God sees to it that our genuine efforts to give faithfully of our time, talent, and financial treasure will be rewarded in this life and the next. Whatever you do for the Lord in this church or out in the community, however you serve Him, and whatever you give financially to build God's Kingdom will receive a blest reaction from God Himself. I can't tell you what it will be or when it will come, but God Himself promises a reward in response to the giving of ourselves to Him.

But shouldn't we serve the Lord without any expectation of reward? I suppose so. But the simple fact of the matter is Almighty God tells me here and elsewhere that my humble efforts to give of my time, my talent, and my treasure will indeed result in a reward of some kind. God has many different ways to reward us in this life and the next. Some supposedly Christian preachers and teachers say that when we give financially to the Lord we somehow obligate Him to bless us financially. No one can obligate God to do anything. You can't somehow obligate God to make you rich financially. That's a foolish misunderstanding of God's Word. God's rewards ultimately transcend material stuff. God's into stuff like love, peace, purpose, joy, significance and meaning because those rewards are eternal.

Whenever we give anything to the Lord – our time, our talents, our financial treasure – we always receive back from Him what we have given and more. That's just the way God has designed the universe. We only receive back to the extent we have given in any area of life. The blessings of God correspond to our willingness to serve God. If you give just a little of yourself to Him, you get back a little from God in return. If you give more of yourself, you get back more from God. What you receive back always corresponds to what you give. With that in mind, remember, acceptable giving pays.

I know very little about farming. But I was interested to hear a story about a Canadian follower of Jesus who operates a huge grain farm: 2,500 acres. That's almost four square miles. How big is that? If you live west of the church, that's like driving on 161 to Linworth Road, then down to Riverside Hospital and North Broadway, then back east until you meet up again with Karl Road, and then back up to the church. Or, if you live east of the church, that's like driving east on 161 to Sunbury Road, then south to Agler Road, then back west in as straight a line as possible to where Karl Road begins, and then all the way back up to the church. Everything in between those points would be about 2,500 acres. That's one great, big farm! Anyway, this farmer was asked how he planted this vast space with grain seed. Did he reach into a bin, pull out an ear of corn, and pop out some kernels one by one as he walked along? Of course not! Instead, he pointed to something called a distributor. It's about thirty feet wide. Then, he pointed to a big, double tandem truck. He said, "We take that truck, fill it with certified seed, back it up to the distributor, open the slots, and pour the seed into the ground. If you're ever going to be cheap, don't be cheap with the seed!" Why? Because one bushel of seed can yield thirty bushels of harvested grain in a good year. Thirty to one – not a bad return on your investment. God operates on the same principle spiritually. He says, "Believe Me, trust Me, try My plan, prove My ways, and then see the kind of harvest I will give You."

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If so, it will be demonstrated in your giving to the Lord and His work in this world. Cruciform giving is good giving. Cruciform giving is giving that's acceptable to the Lord. May the Lord help each of us never to be cheap with the seeds of our time, the seeds of our talents, or the seeds of our treasure! God will multiply and bless what we give to Him beyond anything we can ever imagine.