

IF THE EAGERNESS IS THERE . . .
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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II Corinthians 8:7-12, 9:6-8

Paul is doing what preachers have done throughout the centuries, trying to get people to give to a good cause. In this case he is appealing to the good folks in the city of Corinth to give to an offering for the people in Jerusalem. Actually, the Corinthian church had agreed earlier to contribute to this offering, but they hadn't come through yet. So Paul is gently nudging them to fulfill their pledge. He indicates that he'll be sending Titus to pick up their offering.

Paul is not scolding them, though, or laying a guilt trip on them. In fact, he calls on them not only to be generous, but to be glad to help with the offering. "If the eagerness is there, that is acceptable to God. . . . God loves a cheerful giver"

So let's see if we've got this right. Paul not only wants the people to give, he wants them to give cheerfully. He insists not only on getting their money, he wants them to give it eagerly. It sounds like Paul thinks we're simple-minded. We know we've got to give money to the church in order for it to operate. But, Paul, do we have to be happy about it? Is that what you mean?

Well, yes, that is exactly what he means. In the Christian faith, giving is not only about the amount of the gift, not even especially that. Giving is first of all about our hearts. It is about what happens to us inside ourselves.

There are two way to look at money in our world—the old way and the new way. The old way to look at money is the way of the world, and it goes something like this: You need money to survive. You never quite have enough. You always need more. What you've got to do with your money is hold onto it, give a little if you must, but hang on to most of it. Look with narrow suspicion at anyone who asks for a donation or a

contribution. They've always got an angle. You know what they say: A fool and his money are soon parted.

When I was in the local Kiwanis Club, I spent some of my Friday nights parking cars for football games at Central High School. Some of you were there. The Kiwanis Club would charge a dollar a car for parking, and would use the money for its various projects—funding things in the community where there was need. The money went, as they say, for a good cause.

A dollar a car. Most gave without complaint. But inevitably and with surprising frequency, someone would fuss about it. “Why do I have to pay this dollar? Most of the time I drive in here for free. What are you doing with my dollar?” They were squeezing that buck so tight that you could hear George Washington yelp.

Somebody's always after your money. You never have enough. You've got to hang onto your money with all your might. That's the old way of looking at money, the worldly way.

The new way is the way of the apostle Paul: Give with eagerness. Give cheerfully. Because, says Paul, it is not first of all about the money, it is about your spirit. It is first of all about knowing Jesus Christ, “Who was rich yet for our sakes became poor.” We give, not with a grudge, but with gratitude.

Sometimes even in the church we have a hard time understanding this. Occasionally someone will say: “Preacher, I've been trying to calculate my giving to the church. I know I'm supposed to tithe.” (Let me say right there that you're not “supposed” to give anything. These are not dues. The due has already been paid by Christ.) Anyway, they ask, “How do I calculate my tithe? Is it before or after taxes?” Which is to say, is the tithe figured on line ??? of Form 1040, the gross income line, or on line ???, the line after my deductions are figured in?

I've got to confess that I don't know how to answer that question. It's an old world question, still calculating, still squeezing, still trying to hang on to what you've got. We want to be legal with God, but keep as much of the goodies as we can.

Paul speaks of another whole way—cheerful giving. The Greek word is *hilaron*—hilarious. We are to be hilarious givers, giving freely and joyfully because we know that

all the obligations have already been met by Jesus Christ. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” It is in that spirit that we give.

Think of the people who have been good role models in your life. They may be wealthy, or they may not. But if they have inspired you, they have surely been generous, eager and cheerful in their giving. They say that no one gets to the end of life and says: I wish I had spent more time at the office. In the same way, no one gets to the end of life and says: I wish I had saved more money. You are remembered not for what you keep, but for what you give. Winston Churchill said it well: “We make a living by what we save, but we make a life by what we give.”¹

Has not God blessed us in abundance? Has God not given us enough for our needs? To be sure, God doesn’t give us enough for all our wants: “I want a new outfit, a new hairdo, a new vacation spot, one of those Hummers.” You don’t have enough for that, even though advertising will always try to persuade you that you need these things. But in our honest moments we have enough and more: enough to eat, to wear, to keep us warm, enough to share with others. Thanks be to God.

The gospel of Jesus Christ invites us to be eager, hilarious, in our giving, because Jesus has been generous with us. The secret of stewardship is that what Jesus really wants—is you. Jesus doesn’t want just 5% or 10% or even if you push out to 12 or 15%. Jesus wants it all—the part you give and the part you keep. Jesus wants your soul, and if he’s got to take your money to get to you, then so be it. He really had it right: Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The wallet bone’s connected to the heart bone.

Today, then, is not about getting enough money to turn on the lights and pay the preacher and support some missionaries. That’s what we’ll do with what you give, but that’s not really what this day is about. This day is about committing yourself all over again to the way of Christ, and seeing your money as one way to show that commitment.

It takes discipline to live and give like that. I know: being a hilarious giver doesn’t sound very disciplined. A hilarious giver sounds like someone throwing dollar bills up in the air as she walks down the street. But those of you who are disciplined in your faith and in your giving know the truth—that you give in season and out of season, when you feel like it and when you don’t.

¹ Peter Gomes, *Strength for the Journey: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*. (HarperSanFrancisco 2003), p. 11.

Suppose God were undisciplined in giving to us. “Well,” says God, “I gave them a sunrise yesterday, but I don’t much feel like it today. . . . They had plenty to eat yesterday, so today I’ll take the day off . . . They had lots of friends to love them yesterday, so today they can figure it out for themselves.” But no: Each day God gives us a new day. Each day God causes our hearts to beat. Each day God sustains us with life and love.

So we respond in the discipline of those who are grateful. You give, not out of obligation or to meet some goal, but give what you can. Paul puts it well: “If we give eagerly according to our means, that is acceptable to God; God does not ask for what we do not have.” (8:12 REB).

Some of you are blessed greatly, and you give greatly. You tithe—10% right off the top. Some of you do more than that. Maybe you will find that, in response to God’s blessing, that you don’t need to be limited even to that generous amount, but that you are able to give an additional percentage in response to the call of Christ.

Others of you do what you can based on where you are in your life—a lesser percentage, perhaps, but still a proportion, diligently given. For some of you, this may be the year to push out and attain the Biblical standard of the tithe. You’ve heard of it all your life, you’ve thought about doing it in other times. What is to prevent you from trying it this time?

I am convinced that the hardest percentage to give is not ten percent, or 11 or 12. The hardest is not going from a medium amount to the challenge of the tithe. The hardest is moving from zero to one percent, from an occasional buck in the plate when you feel like it, to the disciplined, grateful, joyous response to God’s goodness to you. That is the biggest step. I challenge you to take it.

And finally, why give to the church? You understand the importance of generous, hilarious giving. But why not give it to other needy groups—United Way or the Heart Fund or Red Cross. Why direct your giving to the church?

Certainly those other organizations do good things. I give to them, and you do too. But why does my major giving, and the major giving of many of you, go to the church? In the church I could mention many things—the members of our own church who have gone as mission workers to south Mississippi to help with hurricane clean-up, others who have

gone to Guatemala to work with the poor in that country. I could tell of new excitement among children about the new ways they are learning about the Bible upstairs, and the dedicated adults who have given their time to prepare and paint and teach. I could tell of times of fellowship, or the ways we minister to one another in times of crisis. I could tell of the way you faithfully gather at the People's Table to offer food to hungry people.

But let me instead tell a story. Some of you have already heard it, at our mission banquet last summer, hosted by those who had just returned from the youth mission trip to Chicago. On one of the days that the group was in Chicago, they went to a mission called the Kids' Café, a place that provided activities and food for children in one of the rough areas of the Windy City. Our group got there by riding the El, the public transportation in Chicago. They rode and rode and rode, out past all the tourist areas and areas where the well-to-do lived, out practically to the end of the line, to an area that was a dangerous combination of seedy and shady. Our little intrepid band walked the several blocks to the facility, and had a wonderful time working with the children there.

Toward the end of the day, the center's director said it was time for them to go. "What do you have—a van parked outside?" No, we're taking the El. "Oh, then get going right away. You don't want to stay in this neighborhood another minute."

So our group, alone and defenseless, walked back the several blocks to the El station. The buildings looked even more sinister and foreboding. And when they got to the station, they had to wait on the platform for what seemed like an eternity. Maggie confessed that she was getting worried for the safety of the group. It was one of the young people in the group, Jordan Dale, who sensed Maggie's anxiety. Jordan is now off as a freshman at Penn State. I contacted him this week to get his permission to share his comment with you. In the midst of the group's nervousness, and their well-founded concern that something might happen, Jordan said: "Don't worry, Maggie. We've got a whole church praying for us. It will be all right."

Friends, do you want to know why I give my money to the church? I give because it is here that a young person learns about the power of prayer, and comes to trust that Jesus Christ our Lord, and will not leave us alone. ✠