

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“The Spirituality of Giving”

By Eric Howell
2 Corinthians 8:1-15
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In 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9 Paul is trying to raise money from the Corinthian Christians to send back to the Jerusalem Christians. He’s been going all over from northern to southern Greece trying to raise up a collection and encouraging the Corinthians to “see that you excel in this act of grace also” (v. 7).

The background is in Galatians 2. There Paul describes a meeting he had with the leaders of the Jerusalem church that was prompted by a sharp disagreement about whether non-Jews could be Christians. It’s not a question that we ask anymore, but Jesus and all the disciples were Jews, and in the very beginning all Christians were Jewish and lived in Israel.

The question of outsiders becoming Christians was a serious question. Some leaders thought that a person had to become Jewish before becoming a Christian. Paul believed people could become Christians no matter who they were. It was a contentious church business meeting. They ended their meeting by sending Paul out to bring Christ to the Gentiles—in places like Corinth and Rome and beyond—with the admonition to ‘remember the poor.’ In other words, we are going to agree to disagree here, so go, and as you do, please send money back to the poor Jewish Christians here in Jerusalem who taught you the faith and were the first witnesses to Jesus. This is the Jerusalem church we read about in Acts, who sold all they had and gave it to any who had need, expecting Jesus to come back to any day. When He didn’t come, they were left with a sustainability problem. The Jesus movement, so to speak, attracted poor people who were given hope and accepted for the first time. And once all these folks were in the church in those first days, they sold everything they had. So the Jerusalem church for all its faith and courage was in trouble.

So, early on, we see two of the early practices of the church, traditions that continue to this day in almost every church everywhere. No, not baptism and communion. Fighting with each other over theology and raising money.

Turning back to 2 Corinthians 8, we leave behind the fighting and disagreeing and are left with the fund-raising efforts of Paul to collect money from churches to send back to Jerusalem to help the saints. You may not be as familiar with the passage read this morning as you are with some other verses in this same section, like 9:6, “whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.” And 9:7, “God loves a cheerful giver”. This passage is about this particular effort, but there is a larger point: In all kinds of ways, Christians are givers. It’s foundational to who we are for all kinds of reasons.

There’s a Christology of giving (v. 9)—Christ was rich and became poor for you, so by your poverty you might become rich. We remember the *kenosis*—the pouring out Jesus did for us. How can we not give to someone in need with all we have been given?

There's a psychology of giving (v. 10)—it benefits you to complete what you started a year ago, he tells them so finish it well. And we know that finishing well is more important than starting strong, whether it is the ninth inning of a ball game or the final stretch of fundraising for a children's building. Ahem.

There's a communal spirituality to giving (v. 14)—“Your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need.” Your abundance is material wealth to be shared. Their abundance is spiritual leadership and gifting to be passed to you. It's a lesson that givers of all kinds learn over and over and over again. When you give—your time, energy, money, whatever—when you give, you get more than you can ever give away. Somehow, in God's mysterious ways, by loving, you become more loving; by giving, you become more generous; by forgiving, you become more gracious. You become more the person you want to be. More like Christ.

There's lots of different reasons to give. But the primary reason is that it's good for the one who receives and it's good for the giver.

In a certain town in America, there's a hill. And on that hill is a neighborhood, a nice clean arrangement of single-family large homes, a tennis and basketball court, swimming pool and a nice playground. The views from the top of the hill are amazing of the distant mountains. Prime real estate. At the bottom of the hill, driving up into the nice neighborhood, there's a side street to another neighborhood. Next to one another, but worlds apart. Apartments, mostly families subsidized by government rent help. Their playgrounds are over dirt patches. The cars in the driveways on the hill are very different from the cars in the parking lots at the bottom of the hill. The kids from both neighborhoods are bussed to the same school up the road. But they ride separate busses because parents from the hill complained about kids at the bottom. The kids on the hill do well in school, play soccer and lacrosse in the afternoons, and vacation at the beach. The kids at the bottom go to summer school, get off the bus and let themselves in their empty apartments each afternoon, and never go to sports camps. Most have never been hiking in the mountains or played in the sand at the beach.

Most of the children on the hill come from families that are too busy to go to church. The children at the bottom come from families that no church really wants.

The geography of the neighborhoods seems like the geography of their lives. One is up. One is down. One can see to the distant horizon. One is in the valley. One is the destination. One gets passed by. One has hope and a future. One will do well to scrape by.

But if you dig a little deeper into the spirituality of the neighborhood, you are struck by the sense that these neighbors, physically so close, but separated by history and circumstance, need each other. The people at the bottom need the resources—the backpacks and school supplies, the tutoring and after school care, the love and normalcy of a family meal that is taken for granted on the hill. And people on the hill need to give it. Because they need to learn how to give and how to invite someone into their lives who they could love and not expect perhaps much in return that is tangible.

What was true for Corinth and Jerusalem, and two neighborhoods a long way from here, is true for us. To be on the spiritual path to and with Christ is to receive and it is to give. Without abundant, self-sacrificial giving in your life, what part do you have with Christ who gave Himself so fully to us?

This isn't just a message about church financial support, and certainly not a sermon just about giving to the children's building to finish it well, or about giving your time and energy to volunteer for the DaySpring Chart, or join in with mission and ministry efforts of the church or elsewhere in the community. But why not those things? That's where the rubber of faith meets the road of reality. The road of reality is a little bumpy for a lot of us. I heard that up in Dallas at a busy intersection in the business district, there is a young man in a suit carrying a sign that reads, "Aggie Finance Grad: Looking for a Job." For any number of reasons, you might not be able to give what you want right now. While we need to finish our children's building and need to pull together to get it done, this might be a particularly tough time for you for any number of reasons. What we are talking about here is not so much whether you have given a check to the church this week. It's about the shape of our Christian lives. Not so much about money. More about spirituality.

We must conclude from the witness of the gospels and the testimony of the whole New Testament that there is no Christianity without giving and sharing with others. Giving might look different for different people in different times and places—like financial stewardship, missions, service, or evangelism. The place in your life where you are freely, joyfully, experiencing relinquishment of your time, energy, and/or money is the place where you are most likely to be growing and enjoying a blossoming relationship with God.

The spirituality of giving is more than "it's better to give than receive" though that's true enough. And it's awfully nice to receive, let's confess. There's nothing wrong with receiving. The spirituality of giving what you can when you can, even giving 10% or more of your income, is an act of relinquishment that becomes a habit of generosity, which cultivates virtues of love and hope, peace and kindness that forms your character as a disciple of Christ. Even more, it is a participation in God's alternative economy.

Couple of months ago, I saw a Facebook note from a high school friend living in Chicago, working at a Fortune 500 company in a position of responsibility. Out of the blue, between posts about "What state should you live in?" "What color are you really?" and "what muppet are you?" came this moment of serious reflection one morning: "I'm wondering, what exactly, is the process to remove one's self and family from the capitalistic grind?"

The responses to his query reveal a widespread and rarely discussed deep dissatisfaction with the modern individualistic need to increase production and ever-present drive to make more money that is characteristic of our culture. Interestingly, no one who responded demonstrated any imagination, short of moving to another country, for how to live an alternative that is life-giving and joy-filled.

I thought to myself, reflecting on the exchange happening in front of me, that church ought to be the alternative to the capitalistic grind that defines a person's value by

how much money they make and a person's worth by how much they hoard. The shape of the Christian life is that alternative. It has a place for hard work and for income. It has an equal place for generosity and selfless giving. This yin and yang—receiving and giving, coming and going, filling and emptying is the shape of the Christian walk.

At DaySpring we talk about and try to practice this kind of Christianity. We are drawn to the inner life of the spiritual journey and seek ways to grow in the depths of our souls. That can sound selfish, and inward, and individualistic. And any of us who try to practice contemplative Christianity can become selfish, inward, and individualistic if we only focus on what we get from prayer or worship or God or church. But in this quest to know and follow God with our true selves, a word of warning and encouragement comes from Thomas Merton, who you may remember, was a monk who lived a life of simplicity and solitude, the perfect ingredients for someone to be selfish, inward, and individualistic and from whom, we might predict, we would only read about the inward life of solitude and prayer. But he surprises us with insights into the necessary connection between the inward and outward life.

If you regard contemplation principally as a means to escape from the miseries of human life, as a withdrawal from the anguish and suffering of this struggle for reunion with other men in the charity of Christ, you do not know what contemplation is and you will never find God in your contemplation. For it is precisely in the recovery of our union with our brothers in Christ that we discover God and know him, for then His life begins to penetrate our souls and His love possesses our faculties and we are able to find out Who He is from the experience of His mercy, liberating us from the prison of self-concern (ns 78).

One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love (ns 64).

So this is the spirituality of stewardship. It is more than “are you giving a 10% tithe?” It is more than are you giving to a fund-raising campaign. It is about how you become like Christ, who gave himself for us. Let us prepare to give and receive the common elements, and in so doing become the kind of people who are made receivers of grace and givers of love.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who live in eternal union with one another bound by and are in essence perfect love, and in whose image we are created to be known by our love for one another. Amen.

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