

Getting Rich by Giving – 2 Corinthians 8:1–15

At the end of World War II, Germany and Japan were devastated. Between the relentless bombing of German cities and industry and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both countries were reduced to ashes. The United States had its own economic issues following the Great Depression and a war that stretched across both the Atlantic and the Pacific. Yet this country did something that was most unusual. We loved our enemies. We gave generously through the Marshall Plan and other post-war programs. The economic results were rapid and startling. Not only did Germany and Japan quickly rebuild, the United States entered a half-century of unprecedented prosperity. It is an amazing story of getting rich by giving. It's the kind of history that could make an American proud.

As disciples of Jesus Christ we want to make God proud. And one of the ways we do that is through generosity. It is one of the clearest and one of the most measurable marks of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Bible is loaded with practical and positive teachings about money, possessions and generosity. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are learners, so we want to know what the Bible has to say. Learning begins with two important principles.

Principle number one is that everything belongs to God so we should take care of what is his. Psalm 24:1 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

From the first page of the Bible to the last page we find the repeated principle that God created the heavens and the earth and that he owns everything. We are guests, tenants and managers, but we are never owners. God owns our land, our houses, our cars, our businesses, our money and everything. But the good news is that God delights to share his world and his wealth with us. He in-

vites us to his table to eat, to his homes to live and to his businesses to work. Our assignment is to manage God's assets well. It is up to us to take care of the environment, to run the businesses, to raise the children and to care for his property and his possessions.

As managers we have to decide how to divide the pie. God certainly wants us to eat his food, but not all of it. He allows us to spend his money,

but not everything. He welcomes us to enjoy his possessions, but never to become greedy.

It is like working for a large foundation. You are provided an office, a salary and an expense account,

but you are also expected to wisely invest the foundation's money and give it away to help others. It was never intended to be all yours or mine.

It is a simple but profound principle. It is revolutionary and powerful. Everything is God's; nothing is mine. Everything is God's and it is my privilege to manage his assets well. But, sometimes we forget. We act and talk as if we own what is actually God's. So, from time to time God gives us financial setbacks to grab our attention and remind us that we're managers not owners. Everything is his.

Principle number two is that God generously gives to us, so we should generously give like God. Both the Bible and our own experience tell us that God is generous. James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." So all the good things in life come from God.

Romans 6:23 tells us, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Eternal life is a gift from a generous God!

In our lives we will face times when we are

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not smart enough to figure out what we are supposed to do. God is generous in this, too. James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

So the principle is simple. God goes first and then we follow and imitate. God gives to us and we give to others. We are to be like God. We are to act like God. Jesus summed it up in a sound byte quote from Matthew 10:8: “Freely you have received, freely give.”

It’s the same idea that we pray in the Lord’s Prayer when we ask God to “forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” As fully committed followers of Jesus Christ we try our best to follow God’s lead and do what God does. God is generous with us and we are generous with others.

USA Today reported a survey concerning what influenced adult Americans toward charitable giving. Most of the answers were in the single digits: 4% were influenced by radio and television; 3% were influenced by friends and peers; 2% were most influenced to give based upon their family income; 4% of Americans aren’t influenced at all – they didn’t give anything.

Then there’s a jump to a low double digit (14%) who are influenced to give at their place of worship. There is one huge exception to these low percentages. The majority of Americans (61%) are influenced to give by their parents and family. In other words, if our parents were generous, we are probably generous. If our parents were greedy, we are probably greedy.

But wait a minute. As disciples of Jesus Christ our most influential parent is God. We call God our Father and we know he is very generous to others. So, as Christians we are generous givers.

Once a Christian has learned the principles, how do we then practice giving as a fully committed follower of Jesus? While the Bible is full of examples, the highest concentration of teaching about how to give is in 2 Corinthians chapters eight and nine.

Macedonia is the northern part of Greece. It

was a very poor place. It still is. Christians there didn’t have much but they generously gave money to help other Christians in Jerusalem who were even poorer than they were. Saint Paul was so pleased and impressed that he wrote about it to the Christians in Corinth. They were affluent. Corinth was a much more prosperous place, and here is what he wrote:

And now brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that

there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.”

Let’s look at five giving practices from them that will work for us. Practice number one is to start with a personal commitment. 2 Corinthians 8:5 says, “They gave themselves first to the Lord.” The place to start is personal commitment to Jesus Christ as the Lord of life. If he isn’t Lord we either don’t want to give or we give for all the wrong reasons.

A church member once said to me, “Don’t ask me for my money, ask me for my heart. If you get my heart you get my money.” That’s a paraphrase of what Jesus said in Matthew 6:21 when he told us that where our treasures are, there will our hearts be also.

The greatest commandment in the Bible isn’t about giving money it’s about loving God. Matthew 22:37 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Loving God is first and most important. When we give ourselves to him everything else about discipleship flows out of that spiritual commitment. Giving is a result of discipleship. Start with a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The second practice that is taught here is to give proportionately. Sometimes people will ask me, “How much of my money should I give away?” The answer is that I really don’t know. It all depends. Some people target 10%. Lots of Christians give more than 10% and lots give less than 10%. Some give nothing.

The repeated New Testament principle is that our giving should be in proportion to how much we have. If we have a lot, we should give a lot. If

we have a little, we should give a little. There are deeply committed Christians who give less than a dollar a week because they don’t have much to give. There are deeply committed Christians who give away a high percentage of their millions of dollars because they have lots to give.

2 Corinthians 8:3 says that the Macedonian Christians “gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” Verse 12 teaches us that “if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” That certainly makes sense to me – no one can give what they don’t have. The person on minimum wage is generous giving a minimum gift. The person with big bucks is generous giving maximum gifts. The biblical teaching for disciples is to give proportionately.

The third practice is to be a team player. The New Testament Christians pooled their gifts. They did this to get more bang for the buck, but they also did this so the rich wouldn’t feel proud and the poor wouldn’t feel unimportant.

According to 2 Corinthians 8:13, “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.” For 2,000 years Christians have given together as disciples of Jesus Christ. The poor people don’t have

to worry that their gift doesn’t amount to much and the rich don’t have to worry that they are contributing so much that everything depends on them. We are all Christians. Everything we have belongs to God. Everything we manage came

from him. We all chip in our proportionate share. No one is proud. No one is embarrassed. We’re a team. We belong together. We pray together. We give together. Be a team player.

Practice number four is to have fun. God loves to give. God has fun giving. God gets satisfaction from generosity. God wants the same for us.

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In 2 Corinthians 9:6-7 we read, “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

God wants us to pick a number. Do we want to be sparing or generous? Once we’ve picked a number, we should give what we’ve decided. It shouldn’t be a drag. It shouldn’t be reluctant. It certainly shouldn’t be under pressure. It should be because that’s what we want to do. It should be enjoyable. It should be cheerful. It should be fun.

The Greek word describing a cheerful giver is *hilaron* from which we get our English word “hilarious”. I’ve long thought that the offering should be the happiest, funniest and laughingest part of church services.

There is huge satisfaction in giving. It feels good to bless others. It feels good to help those in need. It feels good not to be selfish. It feels good to be part of something great that God is doing.

What can we say to those who don’t give? They’re missing out on one of the best parts of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Try it. It’s great. Have some fun – give!

Practice number five really isn’t first or last — it permeates every part of being a disciple and certainly is central to giving. Trust God!

In 2 Corinthians 9:8 we read that “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things in all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” And in verses 10 and 11 it says, “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”

As disciples of Jesus Christ we really believe that God will take care of us. We are convinced that we do not have less because we are generous. We trust God to give us what we need and to provide what we can give away. We believe that we

never come out on the short end by doing what God wants us to do. When giving, trust God.

Giving is not most about money. Giving is most about being like God, about being like Jesus, being a Christian, being a disciple of Jesus Christ. As disciples, we live by the principles and we live out the practices, understanding that everything we have belongs to God therefore we must take good care of what is his. God has generously given to us all, so we should be like God in generously giving to others.

The place to start is with a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Once that is done, then give proportionately. The more you have the more you give. Be a team player. Don’t go it by yourself, give together with other Christians. And when you do, have fun. Enjoy the generosity. And through it all, trust God, convinced that he will never let you down!

God, we do trust you. We trust you because we know your generosity and because we know your faithfulness. We consider it the highest possible calling in our lives to be like you. May we be like you! As disciples of Jesus Christ may we be as generous to others as you are to us. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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