

Castle Church

10 Principles Of Christian Giving

John R W Stott



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By John R.W. Stott

It is well known that the apostle Paul organised a collection from the Greek churches of Achaia and Macedonia for the benefit of the impoverished churches of Judea. It may seem extraordinary that he should have devoted so much space in his letters to this mundane matter, referring to it in Romans 15, 1 Corinthians 16, and 2 Corinthians 8-9. But Paul did not see it as a mundane matter. On the contrary, he saw it as relating to the grace of God, the cross of Christ and the unity of the Spirit. In fact, it is very moving to grasp this combination of profound Trinitarian theology and practical common sense.

Moreover, Christian giving is an extremely important topic on the contemporary church's agenda. For I doubt of there is a single Christian enterprise in the world which is not currently hindered and hampered by lack of funds. Only this past week I heard of two Christian organizations both of which are threatened with closure unless their income dramatically increases.

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 the apostle develops 10 principles of Christian giving.

1. Christian giving is an expression of the grace of God - 2 Corinthians 8:1-6

You will notice that the apostle Paul does not begin by referring to the generosity of the churches of Macedonia in Northern Greece. He refers instead to the generosity of God, to 'the grace which God has given to the Macedonian churches' (v.1). In other words, behind the generosity of Macedonia, Paul saw the generosity of God. For grace is another word for generosity. Our gracious God is a generous God, and he is at work within his people to make them generous too.

More remarkable still is the fact that three tributaries contributed to the river of Macedonian generosity, namely (v.2) their severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty. In consequence, the Macedonians gave even beyond their ability (v.3). And they pleaded for the privilege of sharing in this service to God's people in Judea (v.4). Indeed, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to Paul and his apostolic band (v.5). Also Paul had urged

Titus to complete what he had begun in Corinth, the capital of Achaia, a little while ago (v.6). What was this? It was this same 'act of grace'.

This then is where Paul begins—with the grace of God in the Macedonian churches of Northern Greece and with the same grace of God in the Achaean churches of Southern Greece. Christian generosity is fundamentally an outflow of the generosity of God.

Think...

Why can't we take credit for being generous?

Did our generosity originate with us?

2. Christian giving can be a charisma, a gift of the Spirit - 2 Corinthians 8:7

Thus, as they excel in the spiritual gifts of faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness and love, the apostle urges them to excel also 'in this grace of giving'. Similarly in Romans 12:8 Paul includes among another list of charismata 'contributing to the needs of others'.

Why is it important to draw attention to this? It is because many of God's endowments are both a generous gift given to all believers and a particular gift (charisma) given to some. For example, all Christians are called to share the gospel with others, but some have the gift of an evangelist. Again, all Christians are called to exercise pastoral care for others, but some are called to be pastors. Just so, all Christians are called to be generous, but some are given the particular 'gift of giving'. Because they have been entrusted with significant financial resources, they have a special responsibility to be good stewards for the common good.

Think...

Who is called to give more: those entrusted with great wealth or those endowed with the gift of giving?

Are these one and the same?

Are those with neither exempt from giving?

3. Christian giving is inspired by the cross of Christ - 2 Corinthians 8:8, 9

The Corinthians were not being commanded, still less browbeaten, to give generously. Rather the sincerity of their love was being put to the test by comparison with others and especially (it is implied) by comparison with Christ. For they knew the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We take note of this further reference to divine grace. Not only is the grace of God at work in us (v.1), but the grace of Christ challenges our imitation (v.9). Here are two references to poverty and two references to wealth. Because of our poverty Christ renounced his riches, so that through his poverty we might become rich. We must not misunderstand this by supposing that material poverty and wealth are in mind. No, the 'poverty' of Christ is seen in his incarnation and especially his cross, while the 'wealth' he gives us is salvation with all its rich blessings.

Think...

How does Christian giving serve as a measure of our commitment to Christ?

4. Christian giving is proportionate giving - 2 Corinthians 8:10-12

During the previous year the Corinthian Christians had been the first not only in giving but in desiring to give (v.10). So now Paul urges them to finish the task they had begun, so that their doing will keep pace with their desiring. And this must be according to their means (v.11). Thus Christian giving is proportionate giving. The eager willingness comes first. So long as that is there, the gift is acceptable according to what the giver has, not according to what he has not (v.12).

This expression "according to his means" reminds us of two similar expressions which occur in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 11:29 members of the church in Antioch gave to the famine-stricken Judean Christians "each according to his ability." In Acts 2 and 4 members of the church in Jerusalem gave "to each according to his need."

Does this ring a bell in our memories? In his Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875) Karl Marx called for a society which could "inscribe on its banners 'from each according to his ability' and 'to each according to his need' ". I have often wondered if Marx knew these two verses in Acts and if he deliberately borrowed them. Whatever our politics and economics may be, these are certainly biblical principles to which we should hold fast. Christian giving is proportionate giving.

Think...

In what way(s) are Christian giving proportionate?

Should our desire to give precede, follow or infuse the act of giving?

When would each one be appropriate?

5. Christian giving contributes to equality - 2 Corinthians 8:13-15

Paul's desire, he explains to his Corinthian readers, is not that others may be relieved while they are hard pressed, for that would merely reverse the situation, solving one problem by creating another, but rather that there might be equality (v.13). He goes on to repeat his argument. Now at present Corinthian plenty will supply the needs of others, so that in turn Paul illustrates the principle from the supply of manna in the desert. God provided enough for everybody. Larger families gathered a lot, but not too much, for nothing was left over. Smaller families gathered little, but not too little, for they had no lack (v.15).

Thus Paul put the affluence of some alongside the want of others, and then called for an adjustment, that is, an easing of want by affluence. Twice he concluded that this was with a view to isoles, which can mean either 'equality' or 'justice'.

What is this 'equality' for which Paul calls? It may be said to have three aspects.

First, equality is not egalitarianism. God's purpose is not that everybody receives an identical wage, lives in an identical house, equipped with identical furniture, wears identical clothing and eats identical food – as if we had all

been mass produced in some celestial factory! No. Our doctrine of creation should protect us from any vision of colourless uniformity. For God the Creator has not cloned us. True, we are equal in worth and dignity, equally made in God's image. True, God gives rain and sunshine indiscriminately to both the evil and the good. But God has made us different, and has given his creation a colourful diversity in physique, appearance, temperament, personality and capacities.

Secondly, the equality we seek begins with equality of educational opportunity. Christians have always been in the forefront of those demanding literacy and education for all. For to educate is to lead people out into their fullest created potential, so that they may become everything God intends them to be. For example, equal educational opportunity means not that every child is sent to college, but that every child capable of benefiting from a college education will be able to have one. No child should be disadvantaged. It is a question of justice.

Thirdly, equality abolishes extreme social disparity. Julius Nyerere, ex-President of Tanzania, said in his Arusha Declaration that he wanted to build a nation in which 'no man is ashamed of his poverty in the light of another's affluence, and no man has to be ashamed of his affluence in the light of another's poverty.'

The same dilemma confronts missionaries. Should they 'go bush', becoming in all things like the nationals they work among? Or should they continue to enjoy western affluence without any modification of their lifestyle? Probably neither. The Willowbank Report on 'Gospel and Culture' (1978) suggests that they should rather develop a standard of living 'which finds it natural to exchange hospitality with others on a basis of reciprocity, without embarrassment' (Making Christ Known. Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1996, p. 82.)

In other words, if we are embarrassed either to visit other people in their home, or to invite them into ours, because of the disparity of our economic lifestyles, - something is wrong. The inequality is too great. It has broken the fellowship. There needs to be a measure of equalisation in one or other direction or in both. And Christian giving contributes to this equality.

Think...

Specifically, what kind of “equality” does Paul seek in urging Christians to give?

Identical incomes, jobs, houses, cars, clothes, etc?

Equal opportunity for college, apprenticeships, etc?

Parity in lifestyles and relationships?

6. Christian giving must be carefully supervised - 2 Corinthians 8:16-24

The handling of money is a risky business. Throughout church history religion has too often been commercialised. Paul is evidently aware of the dangers. So he writes both that ‘we want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift’ (v.20) and that ‘we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men’ (v.21). That is, he was determined not only to do right, but also to be seen to do right.

So what steps did Paul take? First, he did not handle the financial arrangement himself, but put Titus in charge of them (vv.16, 17) and expressed his full confidence in him (v.23). Secondly, Paul added that he was sending along with Titus another brother, who was ‘praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel’ (v.18). Thirdly, this second brother had been ‘chosen by the churches to accompany’ Paul and carry the gift (v.19; cf. 1 Cor. 16:3). Thus the people who carried the offering to Jerusalem had been elected by the churches because they had confidence in them.

In our day it is wise to take similar precautions against possible criticism. In this connection we have reason to be profoundly grateful for the wisdom and integrity of Billy Graham for declining to handle his organisation’s finances, for accepting a fixed salary and refusing all ‘love offerings’, and for ensuring that audited accounts are published after every crusade.

Think...

Why isn’t my giving a private matter between God and me?

Compare Matthew 6:1-4.

7. Christian giving can be stimulated by a little friendly competition – 2 Corinthians 9:1-5

Paul had been boasting to the Macedonian churches of Northern Greece (e.g. Philippi) about the eagerness of the Achaean churches of Southern Greece (e.g. Corinth) to give, and the South's enthusiasm has stirred the North to action (v.2). Now Paul is sending the brothers already mentioned to the South (especially Corinth) in order to ensure that his boasting about the South will not prove hollow but that the South will be ready as he had said they would be (v.3).

For if some northerners were to come south with Paul, and were to find the south unprepared, it would be a huge embarrassment to Paul, and even a public humiliation for him (v.11). That is why Paul was sending the brothers in advance, in order to finish the arrangements for their promised gift. Then they would be ready and their gift would be generous and not grudging (v. 5) First Paul has boasted of southern generosity, so that the northerners will give generously. Now he urges the southerners to give generously, so that the northerners will not be disappointed in them.

It is rather delightful to see how Paul plays off the north and the south against each other. He boasts of each to the other, in order to stimulate the generosity of both. True, competition is a dangerous game to play, especially if it involves the publication of the names of donors and the amount they have donated. But at least these verses provide a biblical base for the concept of matching grants. We can all be stimulated to greater generosity by the known generosity of others.

Think...

Why was it OK for Paul to “boast” to the Macedonians about the generosity of the Corinthians?

Was Paul concerned to see who gave more, or was he looking for something else?

What was it?

8. Christian giving resembles a harvest - 2 Corinthians 9:6-11a

Two harvest principles are here applied to Christian giving.

First, we reap what we sow. Whoever sows sparingly reaps sparingly, and whoever sows generously reaps generously (v.6). 'Sowing' is an obvious picture of giving. What then can we expect to 'reap'? We should not interpret Paul's point with excessive literalism, as if he were saying that the more we give the more we will get, and that our income will keep pace with our expenditure. No. Each donor should give 'what he has decided in his heart to give'. Neither reluctantly, nor under compulsion, nor for that matter calculating what he will receive in return (Luke 6:34, 35), but rather ungrudgingly, because 'God loves a cheerful giver' (v.7).

If then we give in this spirit, what will happen? What harvest can we expect to reap? Answer: 'God is able to make all grace abound to you' so that 'in all things' (not necessarily in material things) on the one hand you may have all you need, and on the other you may 'abound in every good work' because your opportunities for further service will increase (v.8). As Scripture says, the consequence of giving to the poor is to have a righteousness which endures for ever (v. 9; Ps. 112:9).

The second harvest principle is that what we reap has a double purpose. It is both for eating and for further sowing. For the God of the harvest is concerned not only to alleviate our present hunger, but also to make provision for the future. So he supplies both 'bread for food' (immediate consumption) and 'seed to the sower' (to plant when the next season comes round). In the same way God will 'supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness' (v.10).

These verses are the origin of the concept of 'seed-money', expecting God to multiply a donor's gift. But it has been much abused by some TV evangelists. Paul is not preaching the false prosperity gospel. True, he promises that 'you will be made rich in every way', but he adds at once that this is 'so that you can be generous on every occasion' (v.11a) and so increase your giving. Wealth is with a view to generosity. This is the second principle of the harvest.

Think...

Does God promise to bless us financially if we give generously?

What can we expect to reap as we give?

How does God instruct us to use what we reap?

9. Christian giving has symbolic significance - 2 Corinthians 9:11b-15

There is more in Christian giving than meets the eye. Paul is quite clear about this. In the case of the Greek churches, their giving symbolised their 'confession of the gospel of Christ' (v.13). How is that?

Paul looks beyond the mere transfer of cash from the Greek churches to the Judean churches to what it represented or symbolised. The significance of his collection was not just geographical (from Greece to Judea), nor just economical (from the rich to the poor), but in particular theological (from Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians). His collection was a deliberate, self-conscious symbol of Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the body of Christ.

Indeed, this truth (that Jews and Gentiles are admitted to the body of Christ on the same terms, so that in Christ they are heirs together, members together and sharers together) was the 'mystery' which had been revealed to Paul (e.g. Eph.3:1-9). This was the essence for his distinctive gospel. It was the truth he lived for, was imprisoned for and died for. It is hinted at here, but elaborated in Romans 15:25-28.

Paul writes there that the Gentile churches of Greece had been 'pleased' to make a contribution for the impoverished Christians of Judea. "They were pleased to do it", he repeated. Indeed 'they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings (culminating in the Messiah himself), they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings' (Romans 15:27). It was a striking example of solidarity in the Christian fellowship.

In similar ways, our Christian giving can express our theology, because our gift symbolises our support of the cause to which we are giving. For example, when we contribute to evangelistic enterprises, we are expressing our

confidence that the gospel is God's power for salvation, and that everybody had a right to hear it. When we contribute to economic development, we express our belief that every man, woman, and child bears God's image and should not be obliged to live in dehumanising circumstances. When we give to the maturing of the church, we acknowledge its centrality in God's purpose and his desire for its maturity.

Think...

How does generous giving symbolise our confidence in the power of Jesus Christ and his gospel (that is, aside from trusting God to meet all of our own needs)?

10. Christian giving promotes thanksgiving to God - 2 Corinthians 9:11b-15 again

Four times in the concluding paragraph of these two chapters, Paul states his confidence that the ultimate result of his collection will be the increase of thanksgiving and praise to God.

v.11 'your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God'

v.12 'this service that you perform...is...overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God'

v.13 'men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity...'

v.14 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!'

Here is a crucial test as to whether our giving is authentically Christian or not. Truly Christian giving leads people not only to thank us the donors, but to thank God, and to see our gift in the light of his – the indescribable gift of his Son.

Think...

What is the ultimate result of our giving?

How can we be certain whether our giving is authentically Christian—or a close counterfeit?

It is truly amazing that so much is involved in what may seem to be a straightforward transfer of money. On the one hand, the doctrine of the Trinity is involved – the grace of God, the cross of Christ and the unity of the Holy Spirit. On the other, we see the practical wisdom of an apostle of Christ.

Final Note from John Stott

I hope that our study of these chapters will help to raise our giving to a higher level, and will persuade us to give more thoughtfully, more systematically and more sacrificially. I for one (having preached this sermon to myself before preaching it to you) have already reviewed and raised my giving. I venture to hope that you may do likewise.



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