

*How Then Shall We Live? : The Gift of Giving*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*July 10, 2011*  
*Leviticus 27:30-34, Matthew 6:1-8, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. Listen now to God's Word. "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. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." Now 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. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

I'm sorry that none of you ever got to meet my dad. While we didn't see eye to eye much, he did some extraordinary things. My father was a caterer, and he used to tell me that a party wasn't interesting unless there were more than 1,000 people. He was a deeply ethical man who fought for his employees and was known as the fairest catering boss in town. A couple of years before he died, he ran the food operations at Wheeler Mission in downtown Indianapolis. His job was to make sure that all the men who came into the mission got a decent meal. And before my dad's time, they got food, but whether it was decent or not was a big question.

My dad determined that these gentlemen, many of them homeless, coming out of bad times and bad choices, deserved his best. And so he gave of himself to make sure they knew the love of God when he served them. He used the contacts to find out what restaurants had to get rid of what food what nights – food that wasn't bad but was at its "sell by" date – and these restaurants were at the top of the food chain. The men at Wheeler Mission went from soup to prime rib and lobster. They were flabbergasted. When my dad died at 49 from an aneurism, some friends from Wheeler Mission told us what he had done. A few years ago, someone wrote my mom a note saying they were praying for her, thinking of how my dad worked so hard that, for a brief moment, the men who came into Wheeler Mission felt human again. This was over a decade after he was gone. His giving of himself, I believe, expanded the Kingdom of God.

This morning, I want us to think about giving. We all have a tendency to think about giving in ways that are less than biblical, and so I want to see if we can't get a sense of what biblical giving is all about. In many stewardship campaigns throughout the years, we've all heard about giving "time, talents, and treasures." How true is that? Let's take a look at Scripture and find out.

Almost everybody who's been in church for very long has heard about the concept of a tithe. It simply means 10%. Many of us have been taught that the tithe was the core of biblical giving. Our first reading this morning says that "a tithe of everything from the land belongs to the LORD." But that's not the only tithe in the Old Testament. That's just the first tithe – the tithe given to the Levites who worked at the tabernacle and the temple. The Levites had no land; they lived among all the other tribes. Without that tithe, they would have had nothing and the temple would have gone to ruin. But that's just the first tithe.

Then there's a festival tithe. God commanded the Israelites to set aside a second 10% for their families to attend and participate in the festivals that happened in Jerusalem. The Israelites actually got to consume that tithe themselves. As one author put it, this tithe was like setting aside money for your family to go to Bible classes or a Christian conference. The third tithe was one collected for the poor, and this one was a little different. It was collected once every three years in order to feed those without. So that was 3 and 1/3 percent each year. Then later, when the kings arrived on the scene, they received a tithe. So annually, the Israelites were commanded to set aside one-third of their income. That didn't include any other kind of offerings the Israelites normally gave – free-will offerings, first-fruits offerings, or peace offerings. Ten percent is starting to look pretty good, isn't it?

As we often see in the New Testament, Jesus didn't change the Law but helped explain its intent. The system of tithing and offering in the Old Testament didn't exist to trumpet the righteousness of the people who were giving. God wanted His people to give out of love for each other, to put into practice His command to "love your neighbor as yourself." Instead, it became a prideful thing. The Pharisees believed that because they could give more, because they were wealthy, they had more of God's blessings. We hear that today, don't we? There are churches that teach what's called the prosperity gospel, that wealth is a sign of God's favor, that you give in order to receive. But Jesus said no to all that! Jesus said don't show off your giving. Do it in secret. Make it so no one knows what you give. That way, God will bless you. God didn't create the tithe so that we could feel good about ourselves or to get self-righteous. God gives us opportunities to give so that we might celebrate His goodness and become more deeply rooted in His Kingdom, and that doesn't require earthly praise of our giving.

Paul continues the line of thought found in Jesus' words. Paul writes that cheerful giving is the standard under Christ – not one bound by law. We are no longer under the mandate of a 33 and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> tithe, but we are under the greater blessing. Paul says that we will reap according to what we sow. This is not a teaching about giving to receive more. Instead, he's saying that we have an opportunity to contribute to the harvest of God's Kingdom. The gifts we give of every sort to the Kingdom of God will result in the Kingdom expanding and growing.

Paul also makes sure we realize that generosity is not just a money thing. He tells us, "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." Our giving involves every part of us. And giving is what convinces people of Jesus. Paul says, "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else." Our words may teach about God, but our actions show the reality of God's work in our lives.

I think about missionaries who go onto the field with not a dollar to give away, but because they get involved with the lives of the people where they are, people begin to believe. We live in a country where, though it's becoming rarer, helping other people is something you do. It's a holdover from our culture's Christian history. But in many other countries, helping one another isn't a social virtue. Missionaries have often made inroads by taking care of those that society has rejected and abandoned. By showing grace and mercy, by giving of themselves even unto death sometimes, the Kingdom of God has come into their midst.

So what does giving look like today? How should we approach the issue? First, I think it might help us to start by eliminating typical reasons we don't give. I rarely have people coming up to me asking, "Where do you want me to serve? What can I give to?" When that happens, it's a blessing, but it's unusual. Instead, I hear reasons against giving one's self and one's resources. Let's get them out of the way.

The first one is the biggest, and it's the idea that we have nothing to give. Either our bank book is too empty or our calendar too full or our skill list too short. There are two sides to this coin – one is self-preservation and the other is self-deprecation. When we think we have nothing to give, usually it comes from our desire to be self-reliant. We have been taught to stand on our own two feet, that God helps those that help themselves, that you are responsible for your own destiny. These aren't biblical teachings but American society's teachings. I don't want to call this selfishness because it's not a "gimme gimme" thing. It's more protectiveness. We don't give for fear that we won't have money for something we may need. If we give to the church at the beginning of the month, will we have enough money to pay our bills at the end of the month? If I pledge too much, does that mean the retirement fund or the college fund gets shorted? This goes for time too – if I fill up my calendar giving my time to other people, will I have enough time for myself and my interests? We have nothing to give because we fear not having enough.

The self-deprecation side says we have nothing to give because we aren't skilled or don't have much wealth to give. We think that the limited range of talents we have couldn't be of use to anybody in the Kingdom of God, or that because of some sin in our past we aren't worthy to do God's work. We convince ourselves of our own unworthiness. We're glad for God's forgiveness, but we don't believe He could actually use us.

From a biblical perspective, though, God most often uses the ones with the least wealth, the least talent, the least prospects, and makes them His servants. He gives His people outrageous challenges far past their abilities and says, "I will do it through you." God sent Abraham a thousand miles from his homeland to settle in Canaan. God sent Moses, a murderer who was slow of speech, to lead His people for forty years. He chose David, a shepherd boy, as the nation's greatest king. God made prophets out of farmers and Jesus made disciples out of fishermen. God calls people to give amazingly of themselves, in ways they could not give on their own. And the key is, God provides the needs of His people as they trust in Him...not necessarily *before* they do, but *as* they do. He has all the resources at His disposal so that you can give in whatever way or fashion He calls you to give. It's really a question of faith: are you believing in a God big enough to provide for you to give the way He intends you to give of yourself? Moses didn't want to give of himself in that way; he told God, "find somebody else." But God stuck with him, and eventually Moses became synonymous with the nation of Israel.

Let's take away another complaint...the fallacy of the painful. We think that giving has to be hard. We have a picture in our minds that the only way we can really give is to sell everything we own and go to some foreign country with nothing but the clothes on our backs and be miserable for God. We sometimes think that this is the "spiritual" way to do things, so we don't wind up giving. But if you know that God provides, giving can be a joyful thing! As Paul said in today's passage, "God loves a cheerful giver!" God isn't asking us to do something impossible, to be cheerful about pain! He's asking us to be cheerful because giving is an expression of our love for God. It should be exciting and rewarding.

I've heard it explained another way...if you're going to find the place where you can really give of yourself totally, find the place where your heart's greatest desires and talents meet the world's greatest need, and do that. If you are gifted with numbers, then don't burn yourself out working in the nursery. Volunteer to help do the books at the Hope Center or a mission work. If you are gifted in hospitality and love to serve others meals, find a way to do that with the poor or homeless. If you are gifted in knowledge or teaching, tutor some kids. Giving of ourselves is not meant to be a dull and painful experience, at least not as our regular experience; giving should come out of our working in something God has given us the love to do.

Moving on...another problem is the lie of the local, the idea that "people are hurting right here," that "I can give right where I am" and can ignore the plight of those overseas. I grew up hearing that from my grandmother. Thing was, she didn't give locally either. Here's the problem with the lie of the local...every single person is made in the image of God and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. God calls upon Christians to share the gospel throughout our world. Fact: people in America are not hurting the way people are hurting in other countries. Do we have homeless here? Yes. Do we have people in Michigan who need help? Yes. And through our food pantry and through the Hope Center, we do help them. But in so many parts of the world, a little of our money goes a long way, not just keeping them alive but bringing them hope. When you send \$38 a month to Compassion International, you not only feed a family for a month, you change an entire community. Children are taught God's love and grace at a young age, and whole families hear the good news of the gospel. Your dollars go a lot farther in the rest of the world than they can here. It's not an either/or; it's a both/and. Help locally, but don't use that as an excuse to ignore the world.

Last reason against generosity, and this is the one that hits me the most...compassion fatigue. Everybody wants our money, from our alma maters to cures for cancer to missionary work. It's not that we don't want to give; it's that the need is so great. The more you give, the more the letters keep on coming! When you feel like everybody wants a piece of you, when you're not sure your money is used effectively, when some people use and abuse the system, it can become overwhelming. Sometimes we don't give of ourselves because we're burnt out.

And that happens in the church too. I know a lot of you have given a lot of yourselves and your time and efforts and monies to this particular church. You've wanted to see it grow, and while we've grown deeper in our faith, we aren't more crowded on any given Sunday morning. In the last two years, we've raised nearly \$45,000 to keep a roof over our heads and the temperatures comfortable. That's no small thing. That's huge. When we don't see numeric growth, it's easy to get fatigued. It's easy to ask, "What do I have to show for my giving?"

Let me encourage you. Jesus gave His life for us so that we could have eternal life, but He also promised abundant life here...not life full of wealth and riches, but full of joy and full of the Holy Spirit. Times have been hard, and hard times will come again, but as Christians, we are not ruled by our circumstances. We are ruled by the Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns forever! He has the resources to do more than handle every situation...He is in control of each and every one. We don't need to worry that we are somehow responsible for the millions of things that reach our mailbox and inbox each day requesting aid. God is the ultimate caretaker. Let Him speak to you and work in your heart; let Him guide your giving, knowing that the burden is not on you alone to save the world.

So is there a simple rule for Christian giving? Here's what I see: be generous, be trusting, and be creative. Christ was generous with His life to the point of death. There was a set rule in the Old Testament of 33.3% generosity. That's no longer a given in the New Testament. But could you imagine what might happen if you gave a third of yourself – a third of your time and a third of your income? What if every Christian did? Would the world be a better place? I have no doubt. Do you know what the average Christian gives monetarily? 3%. That's ten times less than the average Jewish person who didn't even have a personal relationship with Jesus gave! Let that shape your vision of generosity. Be generous too with your time. Money can't buy a person inviting friends to church or helping with Sunday school.

Be trusting. Trust that God will give you what you need to live and that He will give you what He leads you to share, both in monetary resources and in talents. Generosity goes hand in hand with trust. When you trust, you know that you can never be overly generous – that God will care for you whatever you give. As Paul said this morning, God changes us through our giving, and He changes the world. Through our generosity, others will see that God is real. And people know the difference between a tight fist and an open hand; they know the difference between obligated giving and joyful giving. Trust that God has enough in His hands to use your hands to share His resources with the world.

And last, be creative. I started this morning with a story about my dad. He didn't have cash; he didn't have steaks and lobster tails to give, either. He used what God had given him – a head for catering, a Rolodex full of contacts, and a beat up van. He worked hard, he gave of himself the way he could, and it made a world of difference. If you don't think you've got anything to give, just think again...and again, and again, until God shows you His plan.

So the ball is in your court now. How is God telling you to give of yourself? Where does your deepest passion meet the world's greatest need? Listen to the Spirit this week, pray, and then give...and as Paul said, "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."