

God's Generosity

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Church is sometimes accused of always being after peoples' money, which is why some pastors try to make light of this. I once heard a pastor in a church service ask people to raise their hands if they believed in the hereafter. Well, people all did, and then the pastor said: Good, because we are here after a good offering. Well, ha ha, but sometimes the accusation that it is all about money stings and sometimes certain churches or TV preachers do give Christianity a black eye by misusing peoples' offerings; but the fact is that generosity is part of what it means to serve as Christ's disciples; and in II Corinthians 9, Paul talks about this in a more extensive way than he does anywhere else. Today on Groundwork, we will dig into Paul's words on this sometimes delicate subject. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now program five of a six-part series that we are doing on II Corinthians, the letter that is a little lesser known than I Corinthians, but a very important letter, as we have been seeing; and on this particular program focusing on II Corinthians 9, we are going to be talking about money and offerings that are given in church, and so I am guessing that we kind of have everybody's attention now.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and again, as you mentioned in the intro, it is one of the commonest complaints about churches and Christian ministries: They are after my money. They are always talking about money; they are always asking for money. Well, you cannot help but talk about money if you talk about the Bible because the Bible has a lot to say about it. Jesus Himself said a lot. Paul says a lot here in his Corinthian correspondence, and one of the reasons he does is because... just a little bit of background to this topic: He was pursuing one of his favorite projects when he wrote to the Corinthians, and that was a special offering or collection that he was raising from the churches throughout Greece in order to help the poor Christians of Palestine, who were suffering greatly; partly maybe because of their faith, partly because of a famine. He comes back to it several times in these letters, and it was a pet project of his for a lot of reasons, but fundamentally because he believed that if Christians were real about their faith, they were going to be generous.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And yet, we are squeamish on this subject in the Church today. I mean, there are three things we really don't like to talk about in public: Sexuality, politics, and our finances; and that is true in the Church, too. I know when I was a pastor I would serve with elders in the church who would say: Please don't tell me what the people in my elder district give every year. I don't want to know. I don't want that information. I don't want to talk to people about their giving; even if they ought to be giving more, I am not going to talk to them about it. We shy away from it, but as you said, Dave, it is a natural part of the Bible; and we will see in this program theologically why Paul thinks it is a natural part; but if you think about it, all through the Bible you do have this natural extension of being a follower of God that you are going to give tithes and offerings. In fact, one of the earliest stories in the Bible is about that.

DAVE BAST

It is as much a part of the life of faith – of responding to God – as prayer or any other spiritual practice that we might care to name. So, you have the story early on of Cain and Abel in the Bible – the two brothers – and they both brought offerings; one of them was acceptable, the other one not so much; and it led to the first murder.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what was different... and the author of Genesis is careful to note this... was that Abel brought the firstborn. He brought the best of the best and gave it to God; but Cain is said... he just brought some of the vegetables he grew. He didn't give the best of his best, and God noticed, and that is an early story in the Old Testament. One of the earliest stories from the New Testament, from the early Church, is also about this: Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5; they sold a piece of property, claimed to Peter that they gave the Church all of the profits, but they really didn't, and they dropped dead.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are not told they were supposed to give everything, but lying about what they gave had what you might call somewhat serious consequences.

DAVE BAST

Death came into that story, too, interestingly enough. So, yes, this is a big deal. This is really kind of serious business. Paul doesn't shy away from talking about it. He addresses it in II Corinthians Chapter 9, beginning at verse 6:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver; ⁸and God is able to bless you abundantly so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁹As it is written: They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever. ¹⁰Now, 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. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

DAVE BAST

So God loves a cheerful giver; probably one of the more famous verses in the New Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is certainly one of the better known ones from II Corinthians, a lot of which isn't known, but that one certainly is. So, right, Dave; you were saying a minute ago that Paul has a project going on to take care of some of the poor Christians in the world, and he is going to the churches of Greece, and he lays it on a little bit thick here. He says: You know, you have to decide what you want to give, but if you want God to bless you a lot, you ought to give a lot yourself. Generosity sort of... you know, it is kind of a quid pro quo. So he is not putting too much pressure on the people, but he is making it clear: Look, God does love a cheerful giver. He wants you to sow generously because you will reap generously – righteousness, maybe material rewards, but certainly this is going to redound to the thanksgiving of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and there are actually some practical lessons we can take away, or principles that Paul enumerates as to how we are supposed to give. It should be done, as he says, not under compulsion. You don't have to give.

God is not going to hold a gun to your head and say: If you don't give, you will die... or something; and he says elsewhere that it is proportionate to what we have. We are not supposed to give what we don't have; but you know, we have to kind of figure it out. There is no law; there is no ironclad rule that it is X percent of this or the other thing; but the main point he seems to be making is that if our faith is real, giving ought to be more or less natural to us, or spontaneous; and if we are grudging about it – if we only give the bare minimum or what we think we need to to get by – well, don't expect to be blessed in any great way either then. I mean, it is not: If I give 25% God is going to give me 50% back; but it is kind of a general rule that your attitude is going to determine how blessed you are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But of course, pastors and others who devote themselves fulltime to gospel ministry need to be paid. They have to eat. They have to have a roof over their heads. When we pool our money corporately we can do more for the poor than we could do individually. So there are lots of practical reasons to give; but there is a deeper reason that Christians can and should be generous; and you have hinted just now, Dave, at what some of those deeper theological reasons are; and Paul is going to spell those out directly. We will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today we are looking at II Corinthians Chapter 9, and the great subject of giving, which Paul addresses here, which we pointed out offends some people, but the Bible is full of it. It is obviously one of the key things that believers do; and we just noted that Paul implies here, maybe more strongly even than implies. He says that God will bless those who give and who give generously; and that seems a little bit like giving is an act of self interest. Well, in some degree, maybe it is; but there are really deeper reasons or motives why we should want to give generously to God and His kingdom causes; and in verse 12 of II Corinthians 9 Paul is going to begin to connect some of those dots for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So here is what he writes: This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people, but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others 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; ¹⁴and in their prayers for you, their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

DAVE BAST

So there are some pretty important Gospel notes that Paul is sounding here with the subject of giving, and chief among them is the note of gratitude.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that is the first piece, Paul says, and he has reminded the Corinthians of this much earlier in the book, including in our previous program, Dave, on II Corinthians 5. Paul is saying: Look, we have been saved from eternal death. Our ruptured relationship with God has been reconciled. We have come back together with God; we have had a reunion with God because of Christ. In fact, the God of the galaxies – the almighty God, who all things being equal, should strike fear in your heart... Guess what? Because of Jesus we get to call Him Abba, Father; and so, Paul is saying: Look what you have been given and say thank you; and giving is one way to say thank you.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift, Paul says; and there, okay, we hear a little hint of Paul's craziness from our last program. He got a little bit worked up over this. He got emotional; so much so that some said: Paul, you are beside yourself, as when he was preaching the Gospel once to a Roman official. The guy said: Paul, your great learning has made you mad. Others criticized him of that; but Paul is saying: Look

at what God has given us. How can you not respond? I mean, what can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would give a lamb, as the old carol says; but we give out of gratitude for what He has given to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are saved by grace, and in the New Testament in Greek... but also in some modern languages, there is a tight connection linguistically as well as theologically between grace and gratitude. So in Greek in the New Testament grace is the word *charis*; gratitude is *eucharis*, just two letters added...

DAVE BAST

Thanksgiving.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it is like Spanish and Italian. In Spanish if you want to say thank you, you say: Gracias, which has *grace* right in it; in Italian it is *grazie*, which has grace right in it. There is this natural link between recognizing that your whole life is grace and being grateful in return; and part of your gratitude, Paul says, is being a generous giver of also material things or your time, your talent... you know, we talk time, talent, treasure. Being generous just shows that you get it – you have been saved by grace so you get it.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and I think that it is important to point out that there are many ways of saying thank you that don't involve money. Most of what we want to focus on is the pocketbook, the checkbook, the bank account, because – let's get real – that is where most of us place our emphasis and where we are most likely to clam up if that is what we want to do; but you don't have to be a wealthy person to be overflowing with gratitude and generosity. As you just said, Scott, there are many other things you can give to show your thankfulness. In our tradition, Scott, as you well know, and we have often referred to this on these programs – these Groundwork programs – we treasure a document called: *The Heidelberg Catechism*; and it is a wonderful compendium of what evangelical Christianity really holds to and believes; and it is sometimes divided into three parts or segments, which are labeled: Guilt – that is our human problem before God as sinful people; grace – that is God's solution; in Christ God reconciled the world to Himself; and the third section about our life is called gratitude. Our whole life from beginning to end ought to be one big thank you to God for what He has done for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; so that is the first big reason: Why should we give generously? Why does Paul want the Corinthians to give generously to this project he is collecting money for? It is a big thank-you card to God for Jesus; but then he points out: There is a second reason to be generous, and Paul says... and this was in the verses we just read a minute ago, Dave... namely that other people are going to see our generous spirit and make the connection to God. Other people will be able to believe in the God we proclaim better if we ourselves are generous; and so this is part of our witness to other people as well.

DAVE BAST

He says this quite explicitly in verse 12. Let me just loop back to that: This service that you perform... by which he means their giving of the offering – their financial giving... is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people... There is the project – the offering project for the poor. So obviously, if you have any sense of compassion for poor people you are going to want to do something to try to help them; but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. So other people see you do this, Paul says, and as a result they are moved to gratitude, too; they are led to praise God; they are led to worship God by your actions. So, you know, when we live generously, when our churches act generously in the midst of their community or their world, people see that and they are attracted to it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is called good momentum, right? And the flip side, Paul says, is pretty obvious. We proclaim a generous God, but if the Church is stingy, who is going to believe it? Who is going to believe that we really

serve a generous God, who by grace alone has saved us through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross...who is going to believe our witness to a generous God if we are stingy in the Church; or if we spend all of our money just on ourselves in the Church and we never give to the poor; we buy all of the best sound equipment but we don't give anything to the soup kitchen down the street. No, Paul says, if you want to be transparent to our generous God of grace, then you as a people need to be generous and gracious people, too, or there is too much of a disconnect between the message and the messenger, and nobody is going to buy it.

DAVE BAST

Well let's go back to that key verse that we pointed out a few moments ago: ^{9:7b}God loves a cheerful giver. You know what? So do people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You and I are drawn to cheerfully generous individuals and groups of individuals, including congregations. So if you have any interest at all in having an impact on your community as a church, look for ways to show cheerful generosity; look for ways to be visible and evident in giving, in service, in ministry; and wonderful things will happen. People will be led to give their thanks to God as a result, too; and really, I think that deserves a little more time and attention as we talk about more practical matters, and how that could happen. So let's look at that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and let's just summarize what we have said so far on the subject of giving, or Christian generosity – especially financial giving; stewardship we sometimes call it. Paul encourages generous giving to the Church; first because God blesses those who are generous. There is not necessarily a tit-for-tat financial blessing, but he says if you sow sparingly you will reap sparingly, a wonderful analogy from nature: If you put just a few seeds in the ground, don't expect much of a harvest, but if you lavish the seed out – if you give generously – great things will happen; so that is reason number one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then he also has two theological reasons that we just looked at, two very Gospel-rooted reasons. Paul says this is how we say thank you to God. We have been saved by grace, now we show gratitude. There is a natural linkage between knowing God's indescribable gift and what we give in return; and, Paul says, this also is part of our witness. You cannot make people believe in a generous God if you are a stingy Christian; there is just too much of a disconnect. So God will bless you when you bless others. It is a big thank you to God when you show in your own life a level of generosity similar to God's level of generosity in Christ; and your witness is enhanced as people see your generosity. So this all makes sense, and yet, Dave, as we also said at the opening of the program, this is a delicate subject in the Church today. People get very uncomfortable talking about money.

DAVE BAST

It is all wonderful in theory, you know, everything we have said thus far. It is all great; it is true; what a wonderful program we are making here right now on gratitude, and we have given all this theology and all this biblical background; wonderful, great, well and good; but, when it comes down to it, a lot of pastors are still uncomfortable talking about money; a lot of church leaders don't want to pry or be nosey. Honestly, a lot of individuals...Christian leaders...especially in Christian media, have abused this; and frankly, they have given generosity and giving a bad odor in the eyes of many, including of the world, because they have

misused the funds that have been given. I remember reading somewhere not too long ago a phrase of Pope Paul VI, who said: Those who live by alms, in other words, the donations of people, cannot afford luxuries; and all we have to do is think of the luxurious lifestyles of some pastors of big churches or some Christian leaders. It makes all of our words about giving ring a little bit hollow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I read something recently about a very wealthy, famous television pastor who was defending why he needed two private jets in order to do his ministry. That didn't leave a real good taste in my mouth; but the fact of the matter is, even short of that kind of spectacular abuse, you know, I mean, a lot of churches have stewardship Sunday. It is right around budget time. People have got to make their pledges to next year's budget. So the preacher has to preach a stewardship sermon, and he doesn't want to preach it; and the people have to listen to a stewardship sermon, and they don't want to hear it; and we sort of get through it and we say: Whew, we're done with that for another year; but Paul is saying this should not be a touchy subject. It ought to be a celebrative subject. It ought to be something we talk freely about because it is all part of the rhythm of the Gospel. It is part of the heartbeat of the cosmos. We serve a generous God, and so we are generous with one another. It is just part of discipleship is what Paul wants to say. It is a natural part of our devotion to God, period. For Paul, it is that simple.

DAVE BAST

As we have said, I think: In a church that is healthy, where the Gospel is preached and believed and attempts are being made to live faithfully and really and truly follow the example of Christ, money is not going to be an issue. Money is going to flow because hearts will be moved, and that matter of gratitude – of wanting to say thank you, and wanting it to be real and measureable... You know, the Bible talks about a tithe. Now my personal opinion is, that is not a law either, or that is not a rule. Paul has just said: Don't do anything under compulsion; but it is a pretty good marker – it is a pretty good guideline; because if we are going to play games with our faith and with our obedience, we are most likely to play them in the financial sphere, and figure out ways of keeping as much as we can for ourselves. Well, here is one more point that Paul makes here that we haven't mentioned so far. If you do that, what you are really saying is you wonder or doubt that God can provide for your needs. So in a sense, giving is not only a measure of gratitude, it is a measure of faith; that God knows what we need, and if we are generous, if we are liberal in the good sense... That is a beautiful old word; originally it means open-handed and free to give. We can trust that God knows what we need and will provide it. Paul says that here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is between you and God. Paul makes that clear. We are not talking about prying into each other's finances or applying some rigid formula like, oh, it has to be a ten percent tithe, and if you give eight percent you are... no, no, no, no...

DAVE BAST

Is that pre-tax or after tax or, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

It should be done with the spirit of great joy; that this is extending ourselves in the kingdom ministry; not spending all of our money, even as churches, on ourselves, as we said briefly in the previous segment; but indeed, extending ourselves in the kingdom ministry. Look, every check we write, every dollar bill, every quarter we throw into the collection plate, every donation we give to the homeless shelter down the street, all of this is supposed to give expression, right, to what Paul wrote about in II Corinthians 9:15: God's indescribable gift is Paul's bottom line here, and not in a manipulative way. He is not saying: Well, look what God gave; so you know, you can cough up a little more here, you Corinthians. No, but he is saying we live in this bubble of divine generosity. This is the air we breathe. Breathe deeply, Paul says, and you will inhale generosity and you will exhale generosity. It is sort of a Gospel atmosphere.

DAVE BAST

You know, I have to say, this is very personal thing for me to talk about because I for the last 22 years have worked for a ministry. Every dime pretty much of our income comes from the generosity of God's people, and nobody is required to do anything, and every year we start again at zero. Just the way that God has prompted His people to give generously so that we can share His word with the world, as we are doing here, now, in this very moment on this program; to use media to share the Good News that God in Christ loves the world and is reconciling it to Himself. It is a great thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is not a dreary duty, Paul says. This is doxology; this is standing up and singing: Praise God from whom all blessings flow. That is what we are doing when we are cheerful givers. We want to say thanks be to God indeed.

DAVE BAST

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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