

**Prayer, Perspective, and Purpose:  
Paul's Teaching on Giving in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15  
Ronnie Davis, Cape Town Baptist Seminary, Research Associate,  
University of Pretoria**

**1. Introduction**

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously...” (2 Cor. 9:6)

I can recall, on more than one instance, one or another of the many televangelists that inhabited late night television quoting this verse and boldly proclaiming that if I would only send in a “seed” offering to his ministry God would send an abundant financial harvest in return. Such pleas were often accompanied by multiple testimonies of the faithful who had followed the prompting and had been rewarded with money, cars, jobs, homes. It was a fool-proof promise, something that God would have to honour, or so the evangelist would proclaim, yet I wonder if such interpretation is at all what the Holy Spirit had in mind in leading Paul to write these words. Can we affect God's blessings with such an action? Perhaps a more important question is whether or not the issue of giving really is about what we can gain in return.

While Paul does indeed use this proverb as an introduction to teaching on the subject of giving for the church at Corinth, the focus does not seem to stay long on the one giving; rather, Paul quickly brings into focus the manner by which our giving affects God. In truth, although Paul begins this passage with a look at the manner of giving and the benefits of giving for the one who gives, he is more concerned that one understands the theological foundation for the offering of gifts. It is of no less importance today, that the Christian recognizes the reasons for the command to give, and to give generously and cheerfully. In order that one understand fully the foundations for giving established in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15, one needs to understand its historical context, interpret the passage in that context, and apply the universal truths found in the text for the hearers today.

**2. Historical Setting**

In chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians, Paul reminds the church of the need of the poor believers in Jerusalem. The teaching on giving, here, is directly related to that collection; therefore, to grasp the significance of the teaching one first needs to understand the situation that is being addressed. One of the earliest references of any form of the collecting of funds for the church in Jerusalem is in Galatians 2:10 in which Paul writes of the request of the leaders in Jerusalem that Paul “continues to remember the poor.” One finds evidence of Paul's faithfulness to the task as Paul urges several churches to participate in collecting money for the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem: he established a plan of setting aside some money each week in the churches of Galatia as well as in Corinth (1 Cor 16:1-3); he praises the amazing generosity of the Macedonian

churches (2 Cor 8:1-4); he reports of the churches of Achaia giving, which would include Corinth, (Rm 15:26); and in his defence before Felix notes that he was returning to Jerusalem “to bring my people gifts for the poor” (Ac 24:17). One must realize, then, that Paul kept the matter of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem before the churches throughout the second and third missionary journeys as well as during his imprisonment. It is this same collection that is the focus of giving in chapters 8-9 of 2 Corinthians. One might well ask of the nature of the situation in Jerusalem that prompted such a collection.

## **2.1 The Situation of the Jerusalem Church**

The references from Scripture mentioned above describe the collection in terms of the poverty of the Jerusalem church. While the specific cause of the poverty is not clearly established in any of the biblical texts, Martin has summarized five primary theories put forth by scholars (Martin 1986: 256, bracketed numbers added):

“[1] It may have been that the church had grown in size and, with increasing numbers of widows...the relief fund was overburdened...[2] elderly Jewish families migrated to the Holy City...to be buried there in expectation of the resurrection of the dead. Some scholars suggest that Galilean Christians undertook a similar pilgrimage to Jerusalem to await the advent of the messiah ...[3] A popular view is that the experiment of a “communism of love”...involving the pooling of resources and the liquidation of assets...had brought impoverishment...[4] On the external front, we may appeal to bad harvests reported in Judea in the mid-forties of the first century (see Ac 11:27-30); and [5] the persecuting of the church by Jewish authorities, which may well have added to its economic and social woes.”

The most likely suggestion is that the poverty is a particular result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem compounded with the situation of the widows and the poor harvests. Not only were many of the believers scattered from the city, but others were imprisoned reducing financial resources of the remaining believers. Furthermore, Paul’s connecting of the collection for the Jews to the spiritual lives of the Gentiles in Romans 15:27—“For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings”—is even more pointed if one realizes that the persecution of the church directly led to the scattering of the believers and the expanding of the witness of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. In other words, Paul understands that the persecution that brought hardship on the believers in Jerusalem—economic as well as physical—brought life to the Gentiles in the gospel message; therefore, the Gentiles should share out of their abundance to sustain the physical life of their fellow Christians in Jerusalem.

## **2.2 The Situation of the Corinthian Church**

In reading the epistles to the Corinthians, one gains a different picture than that gleaned concerning the conditions of the believers in Jerusalem. The church at Corinth was made up of Jews, Greeks, slaves and freemen (1 Cor 12:13). In spite of—or perhaps because of—the spectrum of ethnic and economic

backgrounds of the believers in the church, friction was evident due to some economic distinctions made. This truth is seen most clearly in Paul's discussion on problems that had arisen surrounding the practices of the Lord's Supper in which some were partaking of a fellowship meal before those of lower economic standing were present (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34). Such tensions in the Church may very well reflect the Corinthian society at large.

Due to its destruction by Rome in 146 BC, Corinth, although rebuilt as a Roman city in 44 BC, was not allowed landed aristocracy. As a result, "an 'aristocracy of money' soon developed" (Hafemann 1993: 173). As the development of the upper class within the larger society becomes reflected in the church, tensions arose. Furthermore, the city of Corinth was immersed in the Greco-Roman culture reflecting the philosophies (the Cynics were especially associated with Corinth), the theatre and entertainment, the sexual morality and religious practices of the day which have led some scholars to proclaim Corinth "the most thoroughly Hellenistic city in the NT" (Fee as cited in Hafemann 1993: 173). The Corinthian church, then, was particularly susceptible to misunderstanding concerning wealth, the providence of God and righteousness of the believer. Paul incorporates all of these themes in the passage at hand, especially the issue of wealth in terms of God's grace for God's purposes.

### **3. Interpreting the Text**

Having surveyed the situation in both Jerusalem and Corinth, one has a better understanding of the setting of 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 and can understand more fully the significance of its teaching. This passage is the climax of Paul's appeal to the Corinthian church regarding the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. He began in chapter 8 with a plea for generosity, urging them to finish the task of giving which they began the previous year (cf. 8:10-12). He then describes, and with explanation of his reasoning, his plans for collecting and administering the gift through Titus (8:16-24). Immediately, Paul, then, encourages the church by providing the example of the Macedonian believers' efforts in collecting for the poor of Jerusalem. Following this example, Paul comes to this final passage in which he provides the theological foundation for giving.

#### **3.1 Assurances for the Giver (9:6-10).**

In drawing a conclusion to the topic of the collection for the saints, Paul first provides words of assurance for the ones who are being asked to give. Paul does not want the church to be burdened with the obligation of giving; rather, he provides three teachings to reassure the church.

First, he provides promises of God's provision in connection to their giving. He uses an agricultural proverb to establish a principle of giving in light of God's designs. The image of sowing is given specifically in the context of the need of the poor contrasted to the plenty of the church of Corinth. The believer must first be aware that in responding with abundance to God's call for charity, the resultant aid is of greater significance. Thus, sowing abundantly into the need of the poor will result in even greater relief of those poor while sowing scarcely will

yield small benefits. The Corinthian believer, however, ought not to think that God cannot act without their gift; rather, the giver benefits as well in joining in the plans of God. The believer, then, must not give of compulsion or guilt but after the manner determined in their heart, presumably after praying on the matter. Thus, the believer is to participate in the ministry of God through giving when unable to physically attend to the ministry, not because God is unable to handle the situations, but so as to include the believer in the work of God beyond his or her immediate circumstances.

Secondly, Paul presents the church with the opportunity to reflect the character of God in the manner of giving. Specifically, he challenges them to give generously and cheerfully. In this admonition, Paul restates the negative not to give 'under compulsion' or 'reluctantly' in a more positive sense to reflect more adequately the nature of Christian giving: in abundance and with great joy. Why should this character be so attached to the task of giving? Precisely, because it is only when giving is done in such a manner that it can be called 'Christian' benevolence. For only if one is willing to reflect God's character in the act of giving, can one expect the ministry and work of God to be furthered in truth.

Finally, Paul states emphatically that God is ably at work. Specifically, he establishes a connection between giving and the work of God's grace in the world. He develops this argument in three parts. First, God is able to meet all needs of the believers through his gracious activity (v. 8). This word is to encourage the believers in Corinth that they will not suffer having given to the needy in Jerusalem. In other words, if they give up their extra finances to help others, they won't find themselves in need. To support this claim, Paul moves into his second illustration of God's grace using Psalm 112:9: God has scattered gifts for the sake of the poor! In highlighting this scripture, Paul is challenging the believers in Corinth to understand that their abundance is directly related to God's grace *for the poor*. This economy of God—the spreading of gifts to provide enough for all—is understood as a declaration of the eternal righteousness of God. Finally, the third illustration of God's capable grace is seen in the assurance to the believers in Corinth that in giving, they will experience increase both in more seed to sow resulting in more bread to eat (cf. Is 55:10) and, more importantly, the harvest of their own righteousness (cf. Hs 10:12).

In verses 6-10, Paul has moved to assure the church that giving is in the context of God's activity, character, and grace. The church will not be harmed or hindered by participating financially with the work of God; rather, the Christian will be grown in the grace of God as seen in a greater ability to continue to give, greater desire to cooperate with God and greater demonstration of the character of God in the life of the believer.

### **3.2 Purpose for Giving (9:11)**

Paul arrives at the key statement of this teaching in verse 11. He establishes clearly the connection between wealth and generosity. Building on the previous verses, Paul declares confidently, "you will be made rich in every way". Once again, the blessing of "richness" is understood to be a result of God's activity: "you will *be made* rich..." Too often, however, the believer likes to stop at this

point and misses the rationale for such blessing of God: “so that you can be generous on every occasion”. Paul is unrelenting in challenging the church in its understanding of its prosperity. Any gift of God is to be surrendered to the purposes of God. The believer does not have the opportunity to pick and choose; rather, the reason is that “you can be generous on *every occasion*”. One should not take this statement as the obligation for the believer to give to every request made. Paul has already established that giving is in response to decisions of the heart (v. 7) and in the context of God’s directions.

Having drawn the connection between riches and generosity, Paul identifies the end desire of such giving: worship of God. While the believers in Corinth were not able to minister bodily to the saints in Jerusalem, through the apostles, their generosity would result in thanksgiving directed to God. The desire of the giver, then, should not be personal accolades but that the one who receives of the gifts should be moved to praise God. This action is the desired result of giving.

### **3.3 Results of Giving (9:12-15)**

Having introduced the topic of the resultant worship of God, Paul turns his attention to the various results of the participation by the Corinthian believers in the collection for the saints in Jerusalem: what are the effects of their giving?

Paul states the most obvious impact of the collection—supplying the needs of God’s people, but qualifies the statement with “not only”. While this goal may be the immediate impetus for the collection, it is neither the sole result nor the most important result. Paul, rather, notes three areas of effect which result from the generosity of giving on behalf of fellow believers in answer to the prompting of God.

First, Paul discusses the effect of their generosity on God. As mentioned in verse 11, the desired result is the worship of God. Paul reinforces the idea in, again, stating that the service, itself, is to be understood as overflowing into “many expressions of thanks to God”. More specifically, others will praise God because of the obedience of the one giving. Such obedience is seen as validating the truth of the gospel in the life of the believer through the nature of such generosity. As Paul shifts focus to the effects on the ones giving, he is stating that in the act of generosity, the gospel is made full in the life of the believer in that one’s confession of the generous gift of God in Christ Jesus is demonstrated in obedience to the calling of God. Furthermore, the generosity of those giving results in prayers offered on their behalf. In these prayers, those who have benefited from the generosity of the Corinthian believers will be drawn in their hearts to those who have given. Once again, the unity of all believers is demonstrated. Just as unity is emphasized in the compassion of the act of giving, so it is seen in the expression of love and thanksgiving in the act of receiving.

A final result is the effect on the gospel. Paul has underlined much of his teaching with the understanding that participation in the collection for the saints will serve as a validation of the gospel. It is in the action of the Christian that the world most clearly sees the confession of the believer. What is believed most fervently about the gospel is lived most consistently. Paul, in particular, has

urged the church in Corinth with the knowledge that their generosity will most clearly demonstrate their understanding of the generosity of God in the offer of salvation. Furthermore, the believer demonstrates a whole-hearted trust in the sufficiency of God—not only in the salvation that has secured eternal life, but also in the grace of God that preserves the present life. Thus with enthusiasm Paul utters a word of thanks as well: for the indescribable gift of God.

#### **4. Applying the Text**

Having examined the passage in light of its historical context, one must move to apply the truths taught in the text to the modern audience. While the apostle is not urging the churches of today in the collection of the saints in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit working in Paul has provided some principles to guide the believer in the task of giving to the work of God, namely, the importance of prayer, perspective, and purpose.

Christians are called to share of their abundance with fellow believers in the work of God. That expectation has not changed since the writing of the epistle to the Corinthian church; however, the specific destination of our giving may well change from church to church. The importance of the believer giving in the character of God cannot be overstated. One is to give as decided in his or her heart, not coerced or with reluctance. This action demands that one be sensitive to the moving of the Holy Spirit so that one can “decide in the heart” what God would call to be given. Pray over needs, pray over abundance, pray over participation.

The act of prayer, however, should not replace the challenge to give. One of the best illustrations of this truth is told by Tony Campolo (Campolo 2000: 153-154) concerning his participation in a World Day of Prayer service. He had not prepared as the meeting had not been placed on his diary and he was literally driven from an airport directly to the meeting so was a bit tired. As a result, he did not act with reservation when asked to pray for a missionary in Venezuela. This missionary doctor was requesting \$5000 to put an addition onto her medical dispensary that desperately needed to be expanded. Tony was asked to lead the group in prayer that the Lord might provide the money needed for the doctor in Venezuela. Tony describes that before he could think to restrain himself he replied, “No! But what I will do is take all the money I am carrying on me and put it on the altar. And I’m going to ask everyone else here to do the same...After we’ve all put the cash we’re carrying on the altar, we’ll count it. Then I’ll ask God to write out a check for the difference” (Campolo 2000: 154). In the end, over \$8000 was given and he simply said to the congregation, “The audacity of asking God for five thousand dollars, when He has already provided us with more than eight thousand dollars. We should not be asking God to supply our needs. *He already has*” (Ibid.). While the methods may be a bit strong, the point raised is exactly what Paul urged the church at Corinth to understand. God has scattered abroad his gifts for the poor and when called upon by God, we are to give of those gifts.

A second application for the modern audience is the principle of a proper perspective. Paul redefines giving in this passage so that one cannot think in terms of simply relieving the suffering of others; rather, in the act of giving for the purposes of God, one is intimately connected to the very work and heart of God. One's confession about the sufficiency of God is demonstrated and acted out in faith. The gospel is preached in action through the obedience of the believer. One is pushed to have faith in God not only for eternal salvation but with daily resources as well. In this manner, the entire act of giving is taken into consideration. The amount is unimportant in light of the manner of one's giving (i.e., the widow's mite as opposed to the Pharisees' wealth). Has the character of God been seen in the actions of the giver? Or has the gift been given with attachments or expectations of reward?

The benefit for the believer is the growth of righteousness resulting from obedience to God. One should not, at this point, think of giving only in terms of financial giving. The believer is called to act out his/her faith consistently in life as well as resources. One may be called to give in sacrificing through service in the local context or in a mission field abroad, but such service does not replace the expectations of financial giving. Why is the latter service so important? Too often believers have more trust in their savings account than in the God that saves. How seriously does one take the imperatives to care for the orphans and widows...to give generously and cheerfully?

The final application is in the understanding of the purpose of giving. God, in His wisdom and grace, has determined that through the cooperative giving among believers, all believers would be supported and the gospel of Christ would be furthered. The unity of the Church should not be limited to words but encompass deeds. The purpose for such generous and loving actions is that God would be glorified and the good news of a God who freely and graciously offers for all humanity the opportunity to be saved from sin would be advanced among all peoples. Ultimately, all the Christian's actions should be in submission and worship to God. One must come to understand that the purpose of any giving must be that God will be praised both by those receiving the gift and those who witness the support. In the state of Texas where I grew up, the Baptist Men organized disaster relief teams. In the wake of a hurricane or flood or tornadoes, they mobilized as soon as possible to minister to victims of disaster. In the testimony of the communities following the disaster, the gospel was always furthered as people realized Christians were willing to live out faith and demonstrate the free and gracious love of God. Are we willing to give if no one is allowed to recognize us for the gift? Are we willing to give if only God receives the credit? Why do we give?

## **5. Conclusion**

The issue of giving is often a contentious one for many people. Some will argue that the Church is only interested in money. Many will look to the televangelists and the multiple pleas for funds and see only greed or self-interest. As a result, many pastors do not feel comfortable preaching or teaching about giving—robbing the believer of the opportunity to participate in the ministry of

God, support other believers in need, and to grow in righteousness through obedience to God! The believer cannot allow the perceptions of the world or the sins of the greedy to negate the commands and expectations of God. Paul clearly defines the role of giving in the life and growth of the Christian. Further, he offers a new perspective on giving in terms of the grace of God and the results of obedience in giving for God, the believers, and the gospel. The believer, then, is called to pray about the matter of giving, gain new perspective on giving, and understand the purposes of giving. Only then, will each follower of Christ be able to proclaim with Paul: Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

## **6. Bibliography**

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