

"The Cheerful Giver"

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November 6, 2011 - Consecration Sunday

II Corinthians 9:6-15

Following worship, one Sunday, a little boy came up to the pastor and said, *"When I grow up, I'm going to give you some money."* *"Well, thank you,"* the pastor replied, *"but why?"* *"Because my daddy says you're one of the poorest preachers we've ever had."*

A cartoon depicts two individuals marooned on an island in the middle of the ocean. One of them is standing at the water's edge, gazing into the distance with an extremely distraught expression on his face. The other is sitting back against a palm tree, perfectly relaxed. *"Don't worry,"* he tells his friend, *"I know we will be found soon. My church pledge is due this week."*

Remember seeing the bumper sticker.... *"Honk if you love Jesus?"* And after that sticker came, *"Tithe if you love Jesus. Any fool can honk."*

So the stories come and go about the church and money. All along the way many insist that the church brings up the subject of money way too much. But, if it is true that money is one of the most important aspects of our lives (think of how much of your mental energy is given to thinking about money) and if it true that we can identify our true life-priorities by looking through our check book or Visa statement....then we probably don't talk about money enough. Jesus taught more about money than salvation....maybe because he knew that how we use our money reflects on the health of our relationship with God. Jesus said, ***"Where your treasure is there will your heart be also."*** Money matters because it is a spiritual matter!

Money and the church go back a long, long way! Let's take a look at one of the primary money passages of the Bible.

Corinth was a large city located in the southern part of Greece. In a portion of Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth he reported about the response of the churches in the northern province of Macedonia to a stewardship opportunity. Paul had planted churches throughout that region in cities like Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

Those Macedonian churches, Paul explained, all responded enthusiastically to his stewardship appeal to raise money from Gentile Christians in Greece and to be sent to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. What a refreshing act of grace to have Gentile believers reach out to struggling Jewish believers in Jerusalem, who were being ostracized for their faith in Jesus Christ.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians Paul used the example of the Macedonian Christians up north to encourage the Corinthians. When you are writing or speaking about something as important as money you do it with great care and Paul did a beautiful job of not pitting the Macedonians against the Corinthians.

- Paul did not press for comparison, saying, *"Those Macedonians really came through, so you Corinthians had better not be slackers."*
- Paul did not urge competition, saying, *"Those Macedonians have given a lot of money to the Jerusalem church, now see if you can give more."*
- Paul did not issue commands, saying, *"Those Macedonians came through generously, now you must do the same."*

None of that! What Paul did do was report to the Corinthian Church *"about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia."* (II Corinthians 8:1) But what was this grace given to the Macedonian Christians? It wasn't an extra infusion of money for we read that the Macedonians had experienced a *"severe ordeal of affliction"* and they were in *"extreme poverty."* The grace of God was the gift of God! Paul writes that the Macedonians *"gave themselves first to the Lord"* and it was God who filled them with grace that *"overflowed in a wealth of generosity."*

The point Paul is making is that the money collected by the Macedonians for the poor in Jerusalem is an evidence of God's grace in their lives. Giving to the needs of others is God's gift to the giver! This is why Christian giving is said to reveal the spiritual condition of our hearts. Refusal to give, reluctance or even resistance can be a symptom of spiritual ill health. Spiritually healthy Christians reflect in their generosity the God who is always giving. That's the message Paul desires the Corinthians Christians to comprehend. With the offering for the Jerusalem Church and the generosity of the Macedonian Church as background let us hear what Paul has to say to the Corinthian Church. Read II Corinthians 9:6-15...

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Friends this is our "get out of legalism jail" invitation! Grace moves us from *guilt* to *gratitude*.....from *duty* to *desire*. We give *not* under compulsion, not because we *have to*, not because we must but because we may--in response to God's grace.

As I ponder this verse I see an invitation to both our left brain and right brain. The left brain; *"each of you must give as you have made up your mind."* God honors our rational side as we weigh the reality of our individual financial circumstances. For instance our Session has challenged each member to consider increasing your 2012 pledge by 10%. You have been invited to make up your mind if that is right for you at this time in your life. Some will be pledging more than 10%, some less, some the same as last year and some less than last year. God gives you freedom to decide.....there are no straight-jacket rules from God.

But this emancipation verse is also right brain; *"for God loves a cheerful giver."* We not only rationally decide what we will give but we also reflect on God's promises, God's blessings, and our personal gratitude for the blessings of Fairmont Presbyterian Church. God gives us life, sustains our lives and surprises us by joy all the days of our lives. When we take a step back to contemplate our personal experience of God's goodness how can we be anything but "cheerful givers." You know it is true....when you have been loved and blessed you naturally want to be generous in return.

I am so glad Paul used the word "cheerful" and you will be surprised at the root of this positive word "cheerful." The word *cheerful* is from the Greek word *hilarotes*. It's linked to our word *hilarity*, or *hilarious*. Now this is not to say that hilarious giving is not about superficial laughs or goofing around or thoughtless responses.

The hilarious giver gives from a deep sense of gladness which is grounded in God's grace and is trusting in God who is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end....the maker of heaven and earth. The hilarious giver is filled with a profound sense of joy for having experienced God's blessing now which feeds a faith that trusts forevermore. The giver is filled with "cup running over" gratitude for who God is and what God has done! The hilarious giver is free to respond with extravagant generosity!

The verse on which we have focused this morning is worthy of further study and Eugene Peterson's translation gives another approach. From The Message; *"I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving."* (II Corinthians 9:7)

So we come to this *Consecration Sunday* when we offer our pledge....not just to support the budget but to delight in the giving. To delight in the giving out of gratitude for Jesus Christ who first gave his life that we might have life! Paul closes out his appeal to give to the Christians in Jerusalem by saying, *"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!* The cheerful giver understands that it is all about the *Gift!* Praise be to God for *The Gift!*

Amen

