

GIFTED TO GIVE

SERIES: *OVERCOMING WITH GOOD*



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Romans 12:13

8th Message

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If you watch public television or listen to public radio you will be familiar with, and probably annoyed by, the regular pledge drives. KQED TV has just finished one, and KQED Radio begins its one on Wednesday. If it is any comfort, the KQED staff probably likes these events as little as we do. But they are a necessity.

Many churches also have pledge drives, only they don't call them that. "Stewardship" is the preferred term, whether an annual stewardship Sunday, or a longer stewardship campaign, whose progress is tracked by a thermometer. These stewardship campaigns have generated a whole industry of stewardship organizations which churches can call upon to design and manage their campaigns. No matter whether the stewardship is couched as being all about gratitude, or about giving back, or about God, or about a way of life, it's really all about the money. Just like public media, churches are non-profit organizations which need to raise money.

Stewardship appeals usually include something about the importance of tithing, often with a snappy statement about the value of tithing. Here are a few I found on the internet:

- We give first and the blessings of God follow!
- When we tithe and give, God moves in favor of us.
- To tithe is to show that we care for the church.

Such claims are usually backed up by this verse from Malachi:

"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need." (Mal 3:10 ESV)

People are reminded that God loves a cheerful giver, as we heard in our Scripture reading (2 Cor 9:6-15):

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor 9:7)

Yet stewardship campaigns and pledge drives tend to generate reluctant, compelled givers rather than cheerful givers.

The topic of giving causes much discomfort, much squirming in chairs, shifting of eyes, and embarrassment. I am not surprised: I have done my own fair share of squirming. I think much of the discomfort arises because the topic of giving is so poorly presented. No matter how it is presented, no matter what pious mottoes are used, it really is usually just about fund-raising. And we don't like being hit up for money, whether it is public radio, or someone outside the grocery store, or a Christian organization, or a church, or an individual.

I had a rather abrupt introduction to Christian fundraising just three months after I arrived in the US. I was at another church with a small but lively young adults group. A young man whom I had gotten to know suggested we have lunch, which I was delighted to

do. But halfway through the lunch the direction of our conversation took an abrupt turn. I knew he was in campus ministry, but I didn't know how the system worked. I felt awkward, used, abused. In his defense, he probably felt as bad as I did. A few years later, after I had moved to PBC, I invited a young man to lunch after hearing him talk about how the Lord was leading him. I went into the restaurant with my mind made up about two things: I was paying for lunch, and I was going to support him. This time I was a cheerful giver and willing participant in what the Lord was doing through him as he prepared to go to the mission field.

As we continue in our series on Romans 12, Overcoming with Good, we come to the theme of giving. In verses 10-13 Paul lists ten ways to show true love, to abhor evil and cling to good. We've been working our way through this list; today we come to the final two items:

Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Rom 12:13)

We'll look at this pair over the next two weeks: giving this week and hospitality next week.

Paul has already mentioned giving a few verses earlier, in his non-exhaustive list of seven gifts that the body should use:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: ...the one who contributes, in generosity... (Rom 12:4-8)

We are called to contribute to the needs of the saints and to do so with generosity. Can the Bible help us to an understanding of giving that will enable us to be givers who are generous and cheerful, giving without regret or reluctance? The Bible has a lot of good things to say about giving, but unfortunately most of it lies hidden. The financial pressures of fund-raising have twisted the Biblical message of giving into a preoccupation with filling the offering plate. So I will have to do as much un-teaching as teaching.

1. Old Testament

The topic of giving begins very early in the Old Testament with Cain and Abel. They were the first givers but they were very different types of givers. Both brought an offering to the Lord. Somehow they understood that it was appropriate to give back to the Lord something of what he had given them, the fruit of their field and flock. But the Lord was pleased with only one offering, not the other. And it wasn't just the offering: he was pleased with only one offerer. Abel had brought the best of his produce, the firstborn and the fat portions, while Cain brought just some of his produce. Abel was a giver, a cheerful giver of both his produce and himself. Cain was a reluctant giver, a withholder of himself and his produce.

Cain and Abel represent two different ways of living life, as the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Subsequently, Israel, as the seed of the woman, was to walk in the way of Abel. Israel was to be a nation of givers, just like Abel.

1.1 The Tithe

When we think of Israel giving, we think of the tithe; and when we think of the tithe, we start to squirm. We all know that Israel was required to tithe, but what was the tithe about? The Israelites were to tithe all the produce of their land and their livestock (Lev 27:30). I don't keep any livestock, not even any chickens, but our garden has yielded plenty of produce. I've brought some of it along as my tithe: butternut squash; yellow squash; zucchini and tomatoes (nowhere close to a tithe for these two); chard; peppers; a cantaloupe; pears; raspberries; mint (but no dill or cumin), sage and rosemary; a bottle of home-made wine, and one of rosemary vinegar.

Suppose I'm an Israelite, what am I to do with this tithe? The tithe was used for three purposes. It was given to the Levites, to whom God had given no inheritance, no land and hence no produce (Num 18:21-32). Instead the Levites were sustained by the tithes of all the other tribes who did have land. In turn the Levites were to tithe their tithe and give it to the priests. This allowed both Levites and priests to continue their service to the Lord on behalf of all Israel. The tithe also provided for the resident alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that they could eat and be filled (Deut 26:12-13).

The third use of the tithe was to celebrate in God's presence. The Israelites were to take their tithe to the central place of worship and there eat it in the Lord's presence (Deut 14:22-23). They were to have a party! But it gets better: if the central place of worship was too far away to carry the tithe, you could sell it, take the money, travel there, and "spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves" (Deut 14:26). You could turn your zucchini into steak or a nice lamb chop! Now what would happen if everyone were trying to sell their zucchini I don't know; right now you can't even give zucchini away. Whether you brought the tithe from home or brought its monetary value, you were to "eat before the LORD your God and rejoice"—you, your household and don't forget the Levite who has no portion of his own (Deut 14:26-27).

Though the precise working of the tithe is a little vague, two general principles are clear. The tithe celebrated the Lord's provision for his people, and it was a channel for the Lord's provision to those who had no provision. Though Israel provided for the Levites and the Levites provided for the priests, it was really the Lord's provision with the twelve tribes and the one tribe as his instruments. Likewise with the provision for the resident alien, the widow and the orphan.

But the tithe was not the only thing the Israelites were to bring to the Lord, to the central place of worship.

"[T]here you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock." (Deut 12:6)

Israel was to be a giving people. If God wanted them to bring him all this stuff, then he would ensure that they had the means to do so.

1.2 Building the Sanctuary

Note what the tithe was not used for: it was not used for any building. Instead, the tabernacle and the temple were built from the

freewill offerings of the people. The tithe was required but the freewill offerings were not. Provision of the materials for the building of the Lord's sanctuary was voluntary, not under any compulsion.

For the tabernacle the Lord instructed Moses to receive materials from "every man whose heart moves him," from "whoever is of a generous heart" (Exod 25:2; 35:5). And so they came, "everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him...all who were of a willing heart" brought materials as a freewill offering to the Lord (Exod 35:20-29). They gave to make a sanctuary, the tabernacle, so the Lord would dwell in their midst.

Several hundred years later David made arrangements for the construction of the temple. Though Solomon was to build it, David provided much of the materials. He also contributed his own personal treasury "because of my devotion to the house of my God" (1 Chr 29:3). Then he called on Israel to offer willingly. So the leaders made their freewill offerings.

Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the LORD. David the king also rejoiced greatly. (1 Chr 29:9)

In his joy David didn't thank the people for their willing generosity. Instead he thanked God in the words that formed our call to worship today:

"Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name."

"But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." (1 Chr 29:11-14)

David had a big view of God: "yours is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty." He understood that everything came from the Lord in the first place: "O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own" (1 Chr 29:16). And so he could freely and joyfully give it back to the Lord. As verse 14 is rendered in the Prayer Book, "all things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." And he thanked God for the ability to give it.

Israel was to be a nation of givers. They gave to build a sanctuary so the Lord could dwell in their midst. They gave to provide for those who had no provision of their own. They gave in order to have celebratory feasts in the Lord's presence. They gave the several categories of sacrifices and offerings. But all that they gave came from the Lord's hands in the first place. If, by faith, they understood this then they could give freely. If they didn't understand this then they would withhold. It was the story of Cain and Abel being acted out again and again, year by year.

2. New Testament

But that was then and this is now. We are not the nation of Israel. The people of God is no longer a national people with a central place of worship. We don't have Levites, a whole tribe set apart by the Lord

for his service. The tithe, as understood in the OT, no longer applies. It is never mentioned in the NT except a few negative references by Jesus to the Pharisees, and a few OT references in Hebrews. But the end of tithing does not mean the end of giving. The principles of giving continue from OT into NT.

The tithe was the Lord's instrument to provide for his people who had no provision. This principle continued in the NT church. God used givers to provide for three categories of people who lacked provision.

One group was the widows. In a patriarchal society, widows without husbands to provide for them were in a vulnerable position. The early church in Jerusalem, probably continuing Jewish custom, provided for them with a daily distribution. It was because a conflict arose between the Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews over this widows' distribution that deacons were appointed (Acts 6). Thirty years later Paul instructed Timothy about the care of widows (1 Tim 5). Primary responsibility fell to relatives. If the widow was younger she was to remarry. If she was sixty or older and of good reputation she could be enrolled, added to the church's register of widows and thus come under the church's care.

A second group was those preaching and teaching. Jesus sent out the seventy-two without provision. They were to benefit from the provision of whomever welcomed them into their house, "for the laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:1-12). Today there are countries with a tradition of hospitality where this sort of ministry is still possible. After the birth of the church, apostles were sent out to preach and to teach. Likewise, they had no provision of their own and, likewise, they were entitled to the support of those to whom they ministered. Paul, however, never insisted on this right, usually, if not always, waiving it. He labored free of charge in both Thessalonica and Corinth (1 Cor 9:18; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8-9). He received support from other churches, especially the church in Philippi which excelled in its giving. Everywhere Paul went the church in Philippi sent gifts to him to support him in his labors. It was while he was in Corinth that Paul worked as a tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquila who had recently come from Rome; they shared the same trade. Paul worked so as not to be a burden to the Corinthians. Though he did not exercise the right to support, he did not begrudge it to others.

A third group was those in material need. When the prophet Agabus prophesied that a famine would befall Judea, the immediate response of the church in Antioch was to raise an offering for the relief of the saints, sending it with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:27-30). Some years later the Jerusalem church was again in need. Paul urged the Gentile churches to contribute to a collection for the church. This collection was of such great importance to Paul that he mentions it in several letters and devotes two whole chapters to it (2 Cor 8-9). From these two chapters we learn much about how Christian giving should work. At the heart of giving lies *charis*, a word that is used ten times here. This is not evident in English for the word is translated several different ways: grace, favor, gift, thanks. The use of this word helps understand how giving works. We can discern five stages in the collection for Jerusalem.

Firstly, gift-giving begins with God who is himself a giver. He has given the gift of Christ:

For you know the grace (*charis*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

This great gift is the foundation for all other gifts and for all giving. God has also graced the Macedonian churches (Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea) more specifically with enabling them to give, so that even in affliction their joy has overflowed in generosity (8:1-2).

Secondly, the Macedonian churches want to pass this gift along, begging Paul for the favor (*charis*) of participation (*koinonia*) in service (*diakonia*) to the Jerusalem church (8:4). Both the gift and participation in giving the gift are a *charis*!

Thirdly, Paul now urges the Corinthian church to participate in this gift (8:7). Here we get the well-known verse about being a cheerful giver: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7). Lest they worry that they won't have the resources to contribute, Paul reassures them, "God is able to make all grace (*charis*) abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (9:8). And what is the good work? It is giving.

Fourthly, Paul and some others will take this gift to Jerusalem, where it will supply the needs of the saints (9:12a).

There is a fifth and final stage beyond the meeting of needs (9:12b). The result of the giving and the gift is thanks (*charis*). Paul gives thanks (*charis*) to God for putting into Titus's heart an earnestness to get the Corinthians to give (8:16). Paul is confident that when the Jerusalem church receives the gift they will thank God for his grace (*charis*) upon the Corinthian church which has enabled them to participate in the gift-giving (9:14). And finally Paul thanks God: "Thanks (*charis*) be to God for his inexpressible gift" (9:15) Which gift is this? It is certainly the gift of Christ who, though rich, became poor so we might become rich. But the whole collection has been about gift from beginning to end; every stage is an act of *charis*.

Furthermore, every stage features abundance. The Macedonians' "abundance of joy" has "overflowed in a wealth of generosity" despite their poverty (8:2). Paul challenges the Corinthians to *abound* in the grace (*charis*) of giving (8:7), so that their *abundance* meet others' need (8:14). God *abounds* his grace to the Corinthians so that they might *abound* in this good work of giving (9:8). And finally, this ministry of giving *overflows* in thanksgiving to God (9:12). Grace-filled giving is abundant and overflowing.

Giving is a grace from beginning to end. God gives the gifts: the foundational gift of Christ, as well as the divine enabling to give, both the motivation to participate in the giving and the sufficiency to give. Both the gift and the giving are a grace. So enabled we pass along the gift to those in need. Reception of the gift results in thanksgiving to God, which closes the circle: thanksgiving for the gift and thanksgiving for the divine enabling of both giver and gift. We are gifted to give. This is how NT giving works.

In his book *Free of Charge*, the theologian Miroslav Volf writes that God's gifts oblige us to a four-fold response.¹ I find this very helpful in thinking about how giving works.

The first response is *faith*: God has given a gift but it requires our faith to receive the gift. We need to be receptive to God's grace, to his gift-giving, and to knowing God as a giver.

The second response is *gratitude*: we acknowledge, appreciate and affirm God's gift, just like Abel.

The third response is *availability*: we make ourselves available to God to be channels for his gift-giving grace. But Volf issues a

caveat which I find very sobering: “most of us want to be agents, not instruments. We want to act, not to be acted upon.”² I wonder how many of our fund-raising campaigns arise because we want to be agents not instruments.

The fourth response is *participation*: we become givers ourselves, participating in God’s gift-giving. The NT term for such participation is *koinonia*.

Our role as pastors is not to coerce you into giving, but, by teaching and encouragement, to get you to see yourselves in this circle of *charis*: of grace, giving and thanksgiving. To get you to see that God gifts us all to give. To stimulate you to have hearts of vitality and hospitality that willingly participate in God’s provision for those who need provision. Then we will participate in the needs of the saints (Rom 12:13). The word for “contribute” in this verse is the verb *koinōneō*; we don’t just give or contribute, we participate in the needs of the saints. There is a fellowship between giver and recipient. The collection for Jerusalem is called a *koinōnia*, a fellowship (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13). And when we give it will be “in generosity” (Rom 12:8). The word used here means much more than generosity; it means with sincerity, without regret, with a whole heart. This word is also used of the collection for Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, 13).

But what about the financing of the church? What about all the things that stewardship campaigns are trying to raise funds for? The NT is silent on such matters. There were no church buildings! The churches met in houses. How should we fund church buildings and operations today? Here we need to use some plain common sense. We are a non-profit organization with certain facilities that we deem necessary for operation. It is up to us as the participants in this organization to contribute the necessary financing. That’s about all that needs to be said on the matter. This is not what NT giving is about.

I close with a few remarks about PBCC’s policy on giving. This is not an exhaustive list, but it will shed a little light on how we function. Most of these policies go back to the earliest days of PBC over sixty years ago.

Firstly, we carry no debt. This means the church is not saddled with interest payments or trying to pay down principal. This frees us to spend money on people.

Secondly, we have no budget. When I tell people this they usually respond in disbelief asking, “How can you function without a budget?” Very easily, actually. No budget means no budget committee with ministries jockeying for line items. And on the heels of budgets come pledge drives. But this doesn’t mean we don’t know what we’re doing. We track expenses by category, so we know where the money goes each year, and we assume that expenses will continue year by year.

Thirdly, pastors and elders do not know what anyone gives. No records are kept, except those required by law. Receipts are issued for gifts of \$250 or more, as required by the IRS, but only our bookkeeper sees those.

Fourthly, if a shortfall develops, then it is time to do some belt-tightening, trimming expenses and asking what the Lord would have us cut. The priority is to make sure all the bills are paid, then pay the staff. If necessary, the pastors take a pay cut.

Fifthly, elders don’t make decisions based primarily on finances, but on seeking to know what God is doing, trusting that if it is the Lord’s work then “God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply.”

Sixthly, the church cares for those who lack provision of their own. This gets to the heart of what the OT tithe and NT giving were about. There are several categories of such people:

One category in need of provision are those the elders set aside to full-time or part-time ministry; the church provides for them. This doesn’t mean that these paid people do all the ministry. It is a recognition that they should be freed up from making provision for themselves in order to devote themselves to ministry.

A second category in need of provision are those with practical needs. They are served by the deacons, and it is not just the deacons; many of you have made yourselves available to be called upon by the deacons. The deacons have done amazing work under the leadership of Bill Harman who has just retired after 13 years. George Stoyko, who has long served as a deacon, has been asked to assume leadership. The deacons have access to the need fund, used to help those who need provision. You have been generous givers to this need fund.

A third category in need of provision are those designated by the elders as PBCC missionaries. They have gone out to various parts of the world, near and far. Without their own provision they are dependent on the provision of God’s people, and so we participate in their need. We encourage you to get to know these missionaries so that you give willingly to them, being a channel for God’s provision, and so that there be a fellowship between giver and recipient. Now 4% of our general fund goes to support these missionaries.

You are a generous people, for which we thank God. You give generously to the need fund. You open your hearts and your wallets when we present opportunities for you to participate, whether it be the orphanage in Mexico, MegaVoice players for the Tarahumara Indians, meal packages for pastors in Indonesia after the economic collapse of that country, the ministry of VisionTrust in Liberia, various endeavors in Romania, or reconstruction on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. The Lord moves your hearts to give and in that we rejoice.

The Lord has gifted us to give. He gives us both the resources and the motivation to participate with him in his provision for those who are in need of provision. Thanks be to God for his amazing gift!

1. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 42–52.

2. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 49.