

MAY 26, 1991

GIVING TO HELP OTHERS

If you hear the word "stingy" do you get a positive or a negative feeling? What about the word "generous" - positive or negative? Why would one person be stingy and another be generous? We could name a lot of reasons: environment, how your parents handled money, how much you care about other people, etc. Whether you are generous or stingy probably doesn't correlate too well with how wealthy you are. You probably know people who have very little that would give away their last dollar to help someone. Who also probably know people who are quite well off who would not give a dime to help anybody. Even though we know this is the case, we still tend to be impressed when we come across someone who gives even when they don't have any excess to spare. The apostle Paul ran across such a situation in some of the early churches in Greece. Just as we tend to think of East Tennessee and West Tennessee as being somewhat different, the Greeks tended to think of northern Greece as being rather different from the southern portion. The northern region was called Macedonia and the southern region was Achaia. Some of the churches (cities) that were located in Macedonia were Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. The best known of the churches in the southern region was Corinth. We see how Paul used the example of one group to inspire another group to do the right thing.

II CORINTHIANS 8:1-5 Paul held up the other churches as examples to be followed by the church at Corinth. It is a good idea to let those to whom the appeal is going to know that they are not alone in helping. Paul could also use this to subtly share with these people what the standard had been thus far. The other church could not afford much, however, in spite of the poverty that they were in, they managed to provide a generous gift and did so willingly. There is an interesting note that before they gave their money, they rededicated themselves to God and agreed to support the church leadership.

I think that Paul recognized that what the churches of Macedonia were doing in sacrificial giving was highly unusual and not normal for most people. He saw this ability as a gift from God. It was as if they had the "gift of giving" that allowed them to give even though they were not rich people. In fact, this area was persecuted by the Roman occupation forces and it was economically impoverished and yet Paul saw that these people had joy. It was out of this joy that they found a way to give generously even though they didn't have much.

Paul saw that they were making a great sacrifice and they had to practically beg him to take the money to the Christian Jews in Jerusalem that were in need. This is an example of a group of people getting their priorities right. They, as their number one priority, gave themselves to God. After that, giving money was not such an issue with them because they realized that it was God's money anyway. Not only did they give themselves to God, they also gave themselves to the apostle Paul in that they submitted to Paul's apostolic authority in the church. This response was beyond Paul's expectation of what new Christians would do in such a situation. Their faithfulness inspired him to renew efforts in other churches to complete the collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

II CORINTHIANS 8:6-8 Titus had visited the church in Corinth and had made them aware of the need. I suspect that there was probably great enthusiasm at first to do take up a collection, but like so many times in our own lives we lose that initial energy and things just don't get done. Most of us are great starters and not-so-great finishers. In a race, it is not the one who starts well but the one that finishes well that wins the race.

Paul complimented the Christian at Corinth for those things that they did well: faith, speech,

knowledge, diligence, love for their Christian leaders. These people were aware of the Spiritual gifts and of the expected fruit that their lives were to bear. Faith is representative of the three power gifts (faith, miracles, healing); speech is representative of the three utterance gifts (prophecy, tongues, interpretation); and knowledge, of the three knowledge gifts (wisdom, word of knowledge, discernment). Diligence and love are fruit of the Spirit. We could think of diligence as being a combination of patience and faithfulness.

Paul's appeal was just that. It was not an order or a commandment to give. This contribution was not something that they were obligated to do in some legalistic fashion. This was an opportunity to demonstrate that they, who had partaken of God's grace in their salvation, could operate in that same grace as it pertained to others. We talk about being more like Jesus and sometimes fail to make that a reality in our lives. God gives us opportunities to prove the sincerity of our love. These opportunities come, many times, in the form of problems that need to be solved.

II CORINTHIANS 8:9 The appeal to be more like Jesus was used in this verse. Jesus is the supreme example of extravagant generosity. Jesus was rich and became poor for our sakes. Would we dare to even become less rich to help someone else? It ought to weigh heavily on us to know that we have the ability to enrich the lives of other people. It ought to weigh even more heavily on us to know that God expects us to do just that.

II CORINTHIANS 8:10-12 Paul's appeal is to their own selfish interest. This is part of the paradox of Christianity: it is in our own best interest to behave unselfishly. He did not dwell on that subject but moved on to encourage them to apply the diligence that they had to finish what they had started. They had a willing spirit to do what was right and Paul recognized that as more than half the battle; however, it is not enough to just be willing if there is no doing. If we are willing, then God is pleased with our gifts as we give in accordance with our ability to give. There is not some yardstick of an absolute amount that might be beyond what we have.

II CORINTHIANS 8:13-15 It is interesting that Paul used an example of sacrificial giving by the churches of Macedonia and then he asked the church at Corinth, not to give sacrificially, but to just share out of their abundance so that others that had great need might have something. Paul reminded them that one day they might be the ones in need and others would come to their relief.

It is important for us to realize that all we have is a gift from God. We really own nothing in an eternal sense. This provision of God for His people was demonstrated in a direct and clear manner when the Children of Israel were in the wilderness and He provided them with manna on a daily basis. You might recall that they were not allowed to accumulate the manna, but were to take only what they would use for that day. If some of them were old or infirm, then they might not be able to gather all they needed. On the other hand, some that were more vigorous and strong could gather much more than they needed. Those that had more than enough were to share with those that did not have enough. This is the origin of the verse that Paul referenced.

If we could truly see that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein, then we might be less stingy and more generous and as a result might be more effective in extending the influence of the Kingdom of God.