

Giving to Make a Difference

How do you as a Christian change your world? Your city or your life? The Bible says one of the critical keys to such power is radical generosity with the resources God has entrusted to you.

The Power of Giving

Paul tells the Corinthians: "Because of your giving by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God...." (2 Corinthians 9:13). Early Christianity spread like lightning in the Roman Empire, especially among the poor and slave classes, transforming lives and society. An early Christian document describes why:

"[Christians] busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven...They marry and have children, but do not kill unwanted babies. They share their table with all, but not their bed with all. They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are poor and yet make many rich; they are short of everything yet have plenty of all things." (a first century writer)

How did Christians transform that cruel old Roman world? How did they sweep away all the older religions and social constructs? No one could match or explain the beauty of their lives. They gave their resources in a proportion and with a joy that the surrounding materialistic culture had never seen. The first Christians in Jerusalem immediately began to practice radical generosity. "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32)"...they did not consider that any of their possessions were their own" (Acts 4:32).

Their generosity had an immense impact on the culture: "they enjoyed the favor of all the people...the Lord added daily to their number" (Acts 2:47). The Roman emperor Julian wrote, "Their success lies in their charity to strangers...the impious Galileans [Christians] support both their own poor and ours as well!" The world was astonished by Christians' non-materialistic lifestyle and profound generosity with their wealth.

The Power for Giving

When Paul asks the Corinthians to give to famine victims in Jerusalem, he says, "I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love...for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:8-9). And one chapter later he says Christian giving must never be "reluctantly or under compulsion" "but cheerful," for by radical giving Christians "prove" themselves to be genuine children of God (see 2 Corinthians 9:6-7). Paul's words are searching. If we do not give away our money in remarkable proportions, we have not grasped (or we are not currently remembering) Christ's generosity in saving us. Let's put it more starkly: you will always give effortlessly to that which is your salvation, to those things which give your life meaning. If Jesus is the one who saved you, the money flows out easily in to His work, His people, His causes.

If, however, your real religion is your appearance or your social status, or personal comfort, or pleasure, your money flows most easily into those items and symbols.

Radical generosity is therefore an inevitable sign of real grace in the heart. An old Scottish minister once wrote, "There are many hearing me who now know they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally, not grudging at all requires a new heart - an old heart would rather part with its lifeblood than with its money." (R.M.M'Cheyne)

Imagine a person who is deathly ill, and he finds a doctor with medicine that can cure him. "But," the doctor says, "the medicine is very expensive, and you may have to give up your home and many of your possessions to purchase it." The ill person says, "So what? What good are my possessions and my home to me if I don't have that medicine? It is now more precious to me than anything I own." These other things that used to seem so important are now expendable by comparison with the surpassing value of the medicine.

Even so, the grace of God makes Christ so precious to us, that our possessions become eternally and utterly expendable to us. They used to be crucial to our happiness, but they are not so now. "To you who believe... he is precious." (1 Peter 2:7) If we truly know Jesus as the great God who voluntarily was torn to shreds on the cross to pay our debt of sin in full, then our attitude toward all we own is forever changed.

The Power in Giving

Here are some practical guidelines for Christian giving:

1. **The guideline of the tithe.** In the Old Testament, all believers were required to give a tithe, one tenth of all their yearly agricultural produce (income) and one tenth of their flocks and cattle (capital). See Leviticus 27:30–34, Malachi 3:6–12, and Luke 11:42. Why? Everything we have is really God’s – we are simply stewards of His wealth.

We are to “give as Christ gave.” How much did Christ give? How does this set an example for us? Have we received less from God than the Old Testament believers did? Are we less responsible to serve him than they were? The inescapable conclusion is: the tithe is a basic guideline for our giving. The history of Christianity demonstrates that this guideline has played a significant role in the giving patterns of His people.

2. **The guideline of sacrifice.** Paul tells us that the impoverished Macedonians contributed to the needy in Jerusalem. “They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their abilities” (2 Corinthians 8:3). They gave sacrificially. Our giving therefore must affect the way we live; it must “cut into” our lifestyle.

Jonathan Edwards kept meeting people who said, “I can’t afford to give to the church and the poor.” He concluded what we really mean, “I can’t afford to give without greatly inconveniencing myself.” Edwards wrote: “If we be never obliged to relieve others’ burdens, but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor’s burdens, when we bear no burden at all?” If your giving does not burden you or cut into your lifestyle in any way, you are not giving sacrificially.

Christians must meet other God-given responsibilities. For example, caring for one’s health and safety, caring for other family members, meeting legal financial obligations, and so on. (See Romans 13:8.) But giving regularly, systematically, and intentionally should not be put off until a golden future level of resources is reached. We should assess our living expenses, some of which may be unnecessarily high, in light of the guideline of sacrifice, as we prayerfully ask God to move us toward higher levels of giving.

3. **The guideline of intentionality.** Paul directed the Corinthians to be systematic and thoughtful in their giving. He told them to save a portion of their wealth each week to give to God’s work (1 Corinthians 16:2). Usually, an actual tally of “spontaneous” and unplanned giving reveals that it was not done in biblical proportions and that there was little sacrifice involved. Paul presses us to be regular, to follow a plan; he continually sent the Corinthians reminders about their giving. This shows that we must be willing to let the church similarly instruct us. How easy it is to conveniently forget our resolutions and intentions. We must avoid subjectivity in giving and become intentional. Here is one way to do that:

- a. Begin by reading Matthew 6:19–34; 1 Timothy 6:6–10; 2 Corinthians 8:1–15; 9:6–15; Malachi 3:6–12. Ask yourself: do I need to adjust my giving in light of the values of God's kingdom?
- b. Estimate what percentage of your money is going to:
 1. God’s ministry through your local church – a primary recipient of our giving due to our involvement in its life and ministries.
 2. Other Christian ministries or workers.
 3. Gifts in the name of Christ to people – outside your family – with economic and physical needs.
- c. Develop a regular plan for giving:
 1. Decide what percentage of your income you will give this year. Seek to follow the guidelines of the tithe and sacrifice.
 2. Prayerfully determine how this giving portion will be distributed
 3. Develop a way to set aside the Lord’s portion whenever you receive money. Decide what intervals (how and how often) you will give.
 4. Write down the amount you plan to give, so you can compare it to statements sent to you of your actual giving. This will help you check yourself during the year.

Most of what this paper just said about money will make virtually no sense at all to you if you do not believe in the God of the Bible. But if you do, remember, there can be no significant spiritual growth in your life unless your money and how you think about it is put in God’s hands. The more you trust in God with your material treasure, the more He will entrust you with His spiritual treasure (Luke 16:9–12). Look what happened when the Son of God opened His hand and let go of his wealth. Open your hand and watch His power flow into your world and your life.