

2 CORINTHIANS 9:6-15
A CHEERFUL GIVER?

Let me tell you about a woman; I don't know her name, but she is famous the world over for one simple deed. It took place in one of the great temples of the world and her deed has become legendary, part of our language. There were thirteen great trumpet-shaped offering boxes and people were coming in and out all of the time putting their gifts into these boxes; some gifts were huge, the people were wealthy. Two things we know about this woman: she was poor and she was a widow and put these things together and we have someone at the bottom of her society, the poorest of people with no-one to look after her and no source of income other than the charity of others. She brought two copper coins, the very minimum offering to bring and she put these two copper coins into one of these thirteen great trumpet-shaped offering boxes. We know her story because someone was watching her and saw what she did and Jesus turned the watching world upside down when He said that she gave more than all the rest put together. Why? "*She out...*" (Luke 21:4)

Money is a hugely controversial subject in Churches. Some churches will tell you exactly how much to give and it is a sign of your dedication and commitment to reach that target. Other times, people criticise the Church because "it is always asking for money" for this, that or other scheme; or they criticise the churches for the way the money is spent. We've said before that the Church of Scotland in 2012 is holding a National Stewardship campaign in which every congregation is instructed to take part, so that the whole church – every congregation and every member – is made aware of the financial situation of the Church and every member of the Church has the opportunity to review what they give to this national project that we call 'Church'. More will come your way about that in the next few months, but for today we think about 'why we give'; why has this woman become legendary for her giving?

Paul is writing to the Christians in Corinth about their giving. Their giving was to a collection for people in need. There was a famine in Jerusalem and the Christians in that city were suffering, were hungry and in need. Paul had suggested to the Churches in Europe that they put together a collection for their fellow-Christians and a couple of weeks ago we saw the arrangements for making sure that the collection was made and was well-handled. Titus and his two friends would come to Corinth to make sure the money was there when Paul came next year and they would then take the money from all the churches to Jerusalem to help people in need. So 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 are about giving: it is a privilege to give; giving is a grace; giving well and handling money well, with honesty and transparency, is a 'credit to Christ.' How and why do we give?

How do we give? There are three answers!

□ **regularly** "*on the...*" (1 Corinthians 16:2) here is the start of the weekly envelope system that we still use, or the monthly Standing order system; something is put aside each week, something each month, regularly put away, so that when Paul comes to Corinth there will be a gift ready to be collected and it will not depend on going round with fund-raising events at the last minute. The Church still says that regular giving is a good habit, it is good for Christian and good for Church.

□ **considerately** "*Each man...*" (9:7) Giving is to be considered. Work out in your own heart and mind what you will give, how much you will give. It is up to you to decide how much you will give to the Church or to other Christian work; no-one can tell you how much you should give; all the Church can do is suggest that you review your giving

regularly and that what you gave 25 years ago is perhaps different from what you give today. The Old Testament principle of tithing is still a guide for some, to give a tenth of their income, but in the gospel era, no-one can tell you what to give.

□ **cheerfully** “*not reluctantly...*” (9:7b) A cheerful giver! The rest of the passage is about cheerful giving and the reasons why we should give cheerfully. But there are other motives: we can give from guilt –“the church will die if you don’t give” is guilt motivation, and not very good motivation at that but you hear it so often, even in Church circles; it produces a response for a little while, but it won’t be sustained. The Church should repent of every effort to make people give out of guilt! Or the opposite: to be thought of as super-spiritual by those who see how much we give; we can put money in the offering bag in such a way as to make sure that everyone around you knows how much you put it; there is a hint of that in the story of the woman at the start of the sermon, that the rich people were putting in large sums of money and were making sure that everyone saw it. “God loves a cheerful giver!” not a guilty giver, nor a proud, show-off-y giver. We are to give cheerfully. Here’s why!

Why do we give?

There are two big themes: “*The service...*” (9:12)

1. we give to supply the needs of others That was at the heart of the Corinthian collection, to meet the needs of people who were hungry and in need in Jerusalem. There were people who were poor and in need of help; they had little food and no money to go out and buy more, so Paul organised the Christians in other places to put this collection together to supply the needs of others. We do that; we detailed some of this a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating: our monthly gift of money to CHO helps in a small way to supply the needs of poor children by helping pay for a teacher in the Safe Haven School. Our giving of presents to the Salvation Army at Christmas time does something similar in our city. Giving is not just money and we give of our time and energy to the work of the Care Van, meeting the needs of homeless people in the city every so often. Our giving to Church supports my ministry in the community and that ministry is all about meeting the needs of people in all kinds of ways; some goes to support people like me in other communities too! We give to supply the needs of others.

Here’s a new way of thinking from Paul in 2 Corinthians. When we give to meet the needs of others, do you see that as money lost? It’s given, gone? Paul would have us think of that money as seed that we have sown. “*Whoever...*” (9:6) He takes that picture and rolls it around in his mind and speaks of God supplying seed for us that will allow us to be generous and especially that “*God is...*” (9:8) When we sow seed in the garden or the greenhouse we have the expectation that something will come of that seed; plants will sprout, flowers will adorn the garden, vegetables will adorn our plate at tea-time eventually. We certainly don’t consider it lost and even if only a certain percentage germinates, we still see some fruit from our sowing. Paul wants us to see our Christian giving as sowing seed that will produce fruit somewhere else. It is a quite different way of thinking from that which suggests that money we have given to God is lost and gone for ever.

There is a response to our giving: “*Because of...*” (v13) Those whom the Corinthian Christians helped give thanks to God for their giving. They give thanks for what that giving represents: it represents a commitment to the gospel and the effect of God’s grace on their lives. So they give thanks for the Corinthian Christians and for their generosity. Their giving results in thanksgiving to God. This is one of the fruits of the seed sown! There is a network of people who give thanks for us when we give: “*In their*

...” (9:14) and the same still holds true. There are people all across the world who give thanks to God for our giving; they may not know that it came from us; they may not know our names; they may know something of Scotland or Edinburgh, but they give thanks to God for our generosity!

2. We give to give thanks to God – “God loves...” (9:7) God is a cheerful giver! “Thanks be...” (9:15) This is the gift of Jesus Christ, His Son, given to the world to be our Saviour. This is the gift of God for us, and it is generous beyond belief, that God should give His own Son to be the Saviour of our world. The whole Bible marvels at the God who should plan this and carry out that plan. God is a cheerful, generous giver. Someone has said that “God’s grace... has started a chain reaction of generosity, thanksgiving and fellowship” (Barnett) and the gift of Jesus started off that chain reaction. We give cheerfully and generously to God and to others because God has given cheerfully and generously to us. Our giving is a reaction and response to what God has done for us. The key to cheerful and generous giving is knowing the grace and love of God. Without that sense of being graced and loved by our Father, our giving will always be a burden and a chore and it will always be money or time or energy lost! Being graced and loved by God, we give of ourselves cheerfully, generously to Him, to the Church, to others.

Before we finish, let’s go back to the woman in our story at the start. It is a little story that lives on in the Bible as challenge to us. We see the world in terms of ‘how much?’ – how much will it cost me? How much will I have to give? How much will I get back if I give you this much? That is the way in which our world thinks when money is mentioned. The people in the background were rich and were putting in large sums of money and thought they were great. Jesus turns all of that way of thinking on its head. It is not how much she gave that counts, but how much she had left over after she gave: “*she out...*” (Luke 21:4) We know nothing about why she gave, but she gave everything; that’s why her story lives on! She gave two copper coins, but she only had two copper coins, yet she gladly gave them to God. This is sacrificial giving at its highest! What do we have left over when we’ve finished our Christian giving?

How to give? Regularly, considerately, cheerfully. We are sowing seed by our giving, seed that will bear fruit across the world, in our community, in our lives as God supplies all that we need to allow us to be generous. This is not money lost, but seed sown, seed that will bear fruit. Other people will thank God for our giving, and will rejoice that by our giving God has supplied their needs; there is a network of praise across the world based on Christian giving to help people in need. God is a cheerful and generous giver: the best and biggest gift He has given is the gift of His Son; Jesus gave of Himself to die on the cross, seed dying so that others may live. Why do we give? We give because we see people in need; we give because God has given Jesus and grace to us. Be inspired by this! Giving is not a burden or a chore to be done from a guilty conscience; let the Church repent of every letter and campaign that has been based on guilt! Giving is a grace, to be done cheerfully and generously because God is the cheerful and generous giver. Let’s give of time, money, energy and gifts to serve God in world and to meet the needs of others. Why? “*Thanks...*”