

And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up.... I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive. And when he had thus spoken, he kneeled down, and prayed with them all. And they all wept sore, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, Sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more. And they accompanied him unto the ship.

— Acts 20:32-38



CHRISTIAN GIVING

E. Jack Chandler Jr.

Imagine how you felt when a close friend moved away. Perhaps your soul was flooded with a number of emotions — thanksgiving to God for allowing Christian fellowship, anxiety over the anticipation of major life changes, and grief over the loss of day-to-day companionship. Good-byes can be difficult, especially where intimate relationships are involved. And for parting friends, the last moments spent together and the last words exchanged often form memories that last for a lifetime.

This was such an occasion.

The Apostle Paul had for three years labored diligently with the saints at Ephesus, discipling them as if they were his own children. He nurtured the young church from its infancy until it could be said that in Ephesus *“mightily grew the word of God and prevailed”* (Acts 19:20). Paul was a warm, caring pastor to the brethren at Ephesus. He loved them dearly and doubtless strove with them through many personal difficulties. He unashamedly proclaimed for them *“all the counsel of God”* (Acts 20:27), and they honored God by applying his teaching.

As his ministry at Ephesus reached an end, Paul called together the elders of the church to bid them farewell. This scene brimmed with emotion as Paul offered tender words of comfort, instruction and encouragement to his fellowlabourers. He reviewed their time together, iterated his burden for the spread of the gospel, and offered some pastoral admonitions. And the tears began to flow freely when he indicated that he expected never to see them again.

But then Paul chose to punctuate his entire Ephesian ministry — and to form the memory that his friends would recall for years to come — with a rather peculiar final comment: *“remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive”* (Acts 20:35). As these were his final words to his Ephesian brethren, I suggest that Paul might just as well have said, *If you remember nothing else from my teaching, remember this: It is more blessed to give than to receive.*

Think about that for a moment. The man who for three years had pastored the Church at Ephesus — and the man who authored the majority of the New Testament — had never recorded these now famous words of Jesus. Yet he would choose to encapsulate

his entire ministry in these few simple words. How is this possible? And how could Paul even *think* about giving at such a time as this?

Paul understood giving to be elemental to the life of the Christian disciple. Clearly, one thread consistently woven through all of his writing — and indeed, through the entire New Testament — is the theme of Christian giving. And since Paul considered it sufficiently important to leave as a lasting impression with his fellow Ephesian ministers, I suggest that giving certainly merits our study.

What *is* the standard of Christian giving taught in God’s Word?

In considering this subject, we shall examine some colorful Old and New Testament patterns that should guide our giving practices. Then we’ll conclude by highlighting some specific giving-related biblical principles common to all the illustrations.

PATTERNS

There seems to be no single, clear biblical command teaching us how we are to give. However, God does provide for us a number of illustrations — patterns, if you will — from which we can derive several guidelines. Here we will consider several such patterns: two from Paul’s New Testament writings, one from the Old Testament, and of course, our Ultimate Pattern, Jesus Christ.

Now Concerning the Collection. In A.D. 50, the city of Corinth was a bustling metropolis: she was thriving economically, politically and socially. Corinthians were rationalists — and they suffered spiritually. The citizens worshipped gods, but they did not acknowledge God.

The Apostle Paul brought to the Corinthians a message of God's holiness and of pure and obedient living. And he actually found among those highly educated Gentiles sufficient interest to establish a Christian church. And what a church it was! It was a winsome body; its spirit, contagious. Paul loved this young church. And Corinth became his home for a year and a half as he labored with her before departing to Syria (Acts 18:11, 18).

Paul is teaching that we should deal with the reality of stewardship constantly and systematically, moment by moment and week by week.

It was during Paul's absence that certain errors — not inconsistent with the character of the city — began to creep into the church. This was the primary occasion of Paul's first letter to the brethren there. The majority of the letter, somewhat direct in tone, is devoted to the conversion of the members from their carnal attitudes and practices to a Spirit-filled walk.

But Paul's tenor changes as he closes his first letter with an appeal for the church's generosity toward a sister church, one a number of miles removed from Corinth. The church at Jerusalem was suffering tremendous financial need, partly owing to the economic distress in Judea, and partly to cruel treatment at the hand of unbelievers. Paul was raising funds for this sister church:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your letters, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem.

— 1 Corinthians 16:1-3

Several distinct points seem to flow from Paul's pen, specifically in the second sentence. The first phrase, "Upon the first day of the week," represents the continuation of the principle of firstfruits giving introduced in the Old Testament. When this passage was written, most people were paid each day for that day's work. Paul is teaching here that it is from the first day's income — the week's firstfruits — that giving should be set aside. The lesson is not legalistic adherence to a rigid schedule, but rather the prioritization of giving. Paul is teaching that we are to be responsible, accountable stewards on an ongoing

basis — that we should deal with the reality of stewardship constantly and systematically, moment by moment and week by week.

There really is no mystery in the second phrase. "Every one of you" indicates the audience for Paul's instruction: he is addressing each member of the body of believers at Corinth.

What is each member to do? To "lay by him in store," Paul continues in the third phrase. The Greek word he uses here for *lay by* is *tithemi*. This word is used 96 times in the New Testament and has several connotations, all related to a putting or setting aside for a purpose. The same word is translated *laid down* when Luke writes of the Jerusalem church members' giving their gifts to the apostles, who then made distribution to the needy (Acts 4:37). It's translated *appointed* in 2 Timothy 1:11 when Paul speaks of his being set aside as a preacher, an apostle and a teacher. And it is translated *purposed* in Acts 19:21, where "Paul purposed in the spirit... to go to Jerusalem." Our giving is to be a purposeful setting aside — a reserving or earmarking of our funds specifically for giving.

In the phrase "as God hath prospered him," Paul addresses the *how much* of giving. *As God prospers* suggests that giving should spring in measure from the wealth that God provides, and that it should increase proportionately as income increases. Does this passage teach, then, that those with more should give and that those with less are excused? Hardly. Paul offers a clarification of this point when, in his second letter to the same church, he deals with the concern, borne of wrong attitudes, that the wealthy should shoulder the full burden:

For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not. For I mean not that the other men be eased, and ye burdened: But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality: As it is written, He that had gathered much had nothing over; and he that had gathered little had no lack.

— 2 Corinthians 8:12-15

An over-taxation of some was precisely what Paul did *not* have in mind. The phrase "according to that a man hath" revolves around the Greek word *katho*, or *in proportion to*. The teaching, then, is that giving should be based on a proportion of income. And if all members of the body are so giving, none is burdened above another.

Hilarious Generosity. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians was written within a year of his first, and its less harsh tone suggests that the brethren had

resolved many of the issues he raised in his first letter. But Paul finds the need to again raise the issue of the collection for the Jerusalem Church. He spends two chapters (8 and 9) in this second letter reminding the church of their commitment and zeal a year earlier — how they had promised to give bountifully to this need — and how the project had apparently lost its appeal:

For as touching the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you: For I know the forwardness of your mind, for which I boast of you to them of Macedonia, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal hath provoked very many. Yet have I sent the brethren, lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this behalf; that, as I said, ye may be ready: Lest haply if they of Macedonia come with me, and find you unprepared, we (that we say not, ye) should be ashamed in this same confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren, that they would go before unto you, and make up before hand your bounty, whereof ye had notice before, that the same might be ready, as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness. But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.

— 2 Corinthians 9:1-7

The key in this passage is its last sentence. Again, Paul underscores the importance of purpose, and iterates that every member has a part. But here he balances his earlier teaching by concentrating on the attitude of the giver: giving is more than logic and mathematics, he says — it's also a heart matter.

“Not grudgingly, or of necessity” speaks of motivation. “Of necessity” here (*anagke* in the Greek) is demonstrated by Philemon (v 14) to be the exact opposite of *willingly*. Giving is to spring from a heart overflowing with love and devotion, not from legalistic constraints or through the imposition of guilt. A willing heart is elemental to a generous, giving spirit. Consider an illustration which most of us have witnessed dozens of times:

A young boy has a favorite toy soldier — so loved and played with that its plastic details are worn smooth. After hours of war games, he becomes distracted by something else and leaves the soldier on the coffee table, apparently forgotten. But when little sister toddles up to the table and reaches for the soldier, there's a whoosh from clear across the room as the boy lunges for and snatches the toy, screaming that four-letter word

all children seem to know: “MINE!” All this commotion of course alerts Mom, who, intervening, discovers that her forcing him to share the toy causes him to grip it all the tighter — she literally must peel his fingers from the soldier as he strains against her with all his might. When finally he realizes his struggle is futile, he gives in with, “Fine, TAKE it... but you'd better not break it!”

This child is giving grudgingly *and* of necessity — precisely the type of attitude, says Paul, which we are not to exhibit.

In stark contrast, he continues, “*God loveth a cheerful giver.*” The Greek word for *cheerful* used here — *hilaros* — is such an extreme word that it is found nowhere else in Scripture. It is from this word that we derive our English word *hilarious*. Paul here is boldly relating a laughing, hilarious heart with a generous, willing spirit.

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Finally, it is interesting to note a peculiar quality of the Greek language. Though the normal order of words in a sentence is like that in English (subject, verb, object), the Greek language allows a great deal of freedom in the arrangement of major words for the purpose of emphasis; that is, word position can indicate relative importance. Such is the case in Paul's construction of “*God loveth a cheerful giver.*” What do you suppose is given the most weight in this phrase? Well, it's not *God*. It's not *loveth*. And it's not *giver*. In the original Greek, the phrase is expressed, *the cheerful giver is loved of God*.

Clearly, the giver's attitude is paramount.

A Wonder in the Wilderness. The biblical accent on the attitude of the giver is not unique to Paul's New Testament writings. Even in the Old Testament, God's Word clearly indicates that giving should spring from a heart overflowing with joy. There are several examples, among them the construction of the tabernacle recorded in the Book of Exodus.

History had been unkind to the children of Israel, by now a nation of many. Since the time of Jacob (or Israel, their patriarch), they had suffered through some four hundred years of slavery under their harsh Egyptian taskmasters. But God had delivered them from their Egyptian bondage, and

through a series of miracles, had preserved them time and again as they wandered through the wilderness in their quest for the Promised Land. There were many deliverances: the pillar of cloud and of fire, the Red Sea crossing, the sweetening of the waters at Marah, daily supplies of manna, and water from a rock. Yet despite many clear providential interventions, the people were largely stubborn and ungrateful, balking often at their faithful leadership and complaining to God in the face of blessing.

In the 25th chapter of Exodus, though, it seems that things were about to take a turn for the better. God spoke to Moses and told him (vv 1-9) to take up a collection for a building — the tabernacle. Chapters 25 through 31 describe in intricate detail the elaborate design of this portable building, its articles, the priestly vesture and the order of the sacrifices and of worship. Then in Chapter 35 the excitement builds, for Moses shares with the people what God would have them do.

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Imagine their sheer delight when they heard the news! Despite their wanton rebellion and constant murmuring, God was about to condescend to dwell in their midst — in a tabernacle that they would construct. These people were thrilled, for they had a glorious opportunity to give of their talents, abilities and substance in the construction of a house for God, a place where His Shekinah glory would dwell, a place where the people would assemble for worship.

And as God stirred the hearts of the people, their response was nothing short of miraculous. They gave of their substance: they brought gifts every morning — gold, silver, brass, fine jewels, exotic fabrics. And they gave of themselves: skilled men and women daily stood ready to offer their talents in the construction effort. The nation of Israel mobilized to build the tabernacle; they gave to please their Great Deliverer.

It is here that Moses makes a clear point through the effective use of repetition:

- *...whosoever is of a willing heart...* (35:5)
- *And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought the LORD's offering to*

the work of the tabernacle of the congregation, and for all his service, and for the holy garments. (35:21)

- *And they came, both men and women, as many as were willing hearted...* (35:22)
- *And all the women that were wise hearted did spin with their hands...* (35:25)
- *And all the women whose heart stirred them up in wisdom...* (35:26)
- *The children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the LORD, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work...* (35:29)
- *...every one whose heart stirred him up to come unto the work to do it...* (36:2)

Is the point clear? Like Paul, Moses is emphasizing the attitude — the willing hearts — of the givers.

Then in Chapter 36, Bezaleel and Aholiab, the construction superintendents, came to Moses with a serious problem (v 5): *“the people bring much more than enough.”* So Moses issued a *STOP GIVING* proclamation, *“For the stuff they had was sufficient for all the work to make it, and too much”* (v 7).

What do you suppose you might have witnessed had you happened upon the camp of Israel during this time? I suggest that you would have *heard* them long before you *saw* them, for there must have been music in the camp of Israel. The tailors raised anthems of praise and thanksgiving. The woodworkers worked to the rhythmic beat of *“The horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea”* (Exodus 15:1, 21). The metallurgists' anvils chimed in pleasant intonations. And there was singing in the camp.

This scene was a symphony on the sand, an orchestral oasis in the desert. Never before had there been such joy among the people. Never before had there been such gratitude, such thanksgiving, such praise.

This camp of the Israelites was an absolute wonder in the wilderness. The people were anxious to serve, and they were willing to give selflessly and hilariously. What a beautiful pattern for us!

The Ultimate Pattern. Of course the ultimate model for our giving is the One after whom we should pattern all of our living: the Lord of Glory. I believe that we tend to paint too austere a picture of the Father — we imagine that He always wears a solemn expression, and that He eagerly waits for His children to step out of line so that He might, in a display of sheer, controlling power, apply the brutal rod of correction. But this perception is far from true, for we read indications in Scripture that He is a God of great joy.

In the fifteenth chapter of Luke, for instance, Jesus wraps three related stories — the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son — within a single parable. Each highlights the immeasurable joy experienced when the lost is found. Jesus relates the lost items to sinners whom the Father draws to Himself, and indicates “*that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth*” (Luke 15:7). One more child has come home. One more sinner has died to self, and has become crucified to the world. Another lost sheep has seen the beauty of walking with the Shepherd. “*There is joy in the presence of the angels of God*” (Luke 15:10). And if the angels rejoice, surely God Himself must revel in the event, for He receives glory.

He is again portrayed as a God of joy by the writer of Hebrews who, in speaking of Christ, wrote that He “*for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:2). What must have been the Father’s reaction when the Son uttered those final, dying words, “*It is finished*” (John 19:30)? Was He stoic? Unmoved? Indifferent? Though fully in control of all events, the Father surely must have experienced a rush of satisfaction as the plan He set into motion “*before the foundation of the world*” (John 17:24; Ephesians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:20) reached a crucial milestone. And three days later when Jesus arose victorious over Death — when all of creation must have joined together in lifting praises to the risen King — surely the Father must have celebrated the completion of the work: *My people have been redeemed! The sacrifice is complete! The price has been paid in full! Sound the trumpets! Let the festivities begin!*

Does this sound like a God who never smiles? I don’t think so! God is a God of indescribable joy. And in demonstrating the ultimate sacrifice — His perfect Son for an unlovable people — He patterns for us the ultimate generous, liberal, giving spirit.

PRINCIPLES

As you contemplate these Scriptural patterns, I urge you to prayerfully consider how you might reshape your own attitudes and practices concerning giving. To that end, let’s focus on some clear points conveyed in these passages. Three specific principles seem to emerge; all three happen to be encapsulated within a single sentence penned by Solomon in *The Proverbs*, one of the Bible’s most practical works: “*Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy houses shall burst out with new wine*” (3:9-10).

Giving is an Act of Worship. Solomon conveys the first point — and perhaps the most important — through the word *honour*. The act of giving demonstrates Who is worthy to receive honor and

who is obligated to give it. Our giving should be extended as if to God in an act of worship, for it declares our awareness of Him and acknowledges the implications of His existence. The giving of our resources tends to empty us of any pride-inspiring thoughts of *self*-esteem, and to fill us with the humbling realization that Christ alone is worthy of our esteem.

Firstfruits giving really is a matter of priority: money should be set aside from income for the purpose of giving before any other outlays are considered.

The word *sacrifice*, which also connotes the idea of homage or worship, is used at least twice in relation to giving. The Apostle Paul, writing from a Roman prison cell to the saints at Philippi, thanked the brethren there for their gift of money to him, reckoning it as a sacrifice to God: “*But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God*” (Philippians 4:18). The author of Hebrews continues in the same vein when he writes, “*By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate*” — that is, to give financially — “*forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased*” (Hebrews 13:15-16).

Giving Should Demonstrate Faith. Through his use of the word *firstfruits*, Solomon indicates that our giving should be a high priority exercise of faith. Named for the practice of a farmer’s offering to God the first fruits gathered in the harvest, God’s principle of firstfruits giving was introduced in association with the Law. This practice is tantamount to acknowledging God as provider and expressing trust and confidence in His continued provision, for there was no guarantee of a future harvest.

In the time of the Apostle Paul, the economy had matured to the point that many held public sector jobs. And at that time, the generally accepted practice was to pay a worker each day for that day’s labor. Paul instructed the Corinthian brethren to lay aside their giving for the Jerusalem church “*Upon the first day of the week*” (1 Corinthians 16:2). That is, a portion of the first day’s income should be earmarked for giving. This expresses faith in God’s promise to provide, for there’s no guarantee of future income.

In today's economy, most workers are paid less frequently than in Paul's day, yet the principle of firstfruits giving is unchanged. The principle really is a matter of priority: money should be set aside from income for the purpose of giving before any other outlays are considered.

Giving Should be Structured. *"The firstfruits of all thine increase"* further teaches that our giving should consist of some portion (firstfruits) of our income (increase). These words suggest that as our income increases, our giving should also increase proportionately.

The Apostle Paul is even clearer than Solomon. The passages from his writings that we examined earlier (1 Corinthians 16, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9) clearly establish that God's people should strive to be responsible, accountable stewards on a moment-by-moment basis. Drawing from these patterns, we must conclude that our giving should be regular, systematic and proportionate to our income.



This study opened with Paul's quoting our Lord, who said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35). Many blessings flow from a gift when the giver's attitude is in keeping with the principles found in God's Word and in harmony with the Spirit's leadership. Permit me to relate a true story as an apt illustration to conclude:

A young Christian husband and wife I know were in the market for a larger car better suited to their growing family. As is their practice with major family decisions, they committed the matter — albeit mundane — to prayer. For some reason, neither could come to peace about selling their old car, which still had several years and several thousand miles of good use ahead. After independently seeking God's will, each was somewhat surprised to learn that the other shared a similar burden to NOT trade their existing car, but to give it away instead, despite the looming

uncertainty of how they could afford a larger car without a trade allowance. Determined to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit and to trust God for guidance, they importuned the Throne of Grace in prayer, completely unaware of His unfolding providence.

A pastor and his family in a distant state owned a family car on its last leg, and were praying for God to provide a reliable means of transportation for their diminishing family. While it was clear to them that they could not afford a car — and unclear to them how God might provide for this need — they trusted that He would.

After several days of poring over their burden and seeking God, the young couple felt a specific leading toward this pastor's family, though completely unaware of his urgent need and still wondering how God would supply their own transportation need. They placed a phone call to the pastor and related how they felt God had placed a desire on their hearts to share with him and his family. God's involvement was confirmed when the pastor, struggling through tears of joy, related the family's recent experience of need and prayer for deliverance.

And that's not the end of the story. After all this had transpired — after their exercise of faith — God blessed the young couple to find the car that answered their need, and even blessed them with an unbelievable price!

Now, whom do you suppose was most blessed in this story? Clearly the receivers were blessed, for their transportation need was supplied. And certainly the givers were blessed, for God provided for their need in a wonderful way. But perhaps less obvious is the fact that God Himself was blessed in this selfless act of giving, for only He could have woven the intricate design into the fabric of this plan — never in their wildest dreams could these families have imagined what God had in store for them.

Isn't He fun?



*Fill me, Father, with a
passionate longing for Thee,
that my spirit might reflect
Your great joy. And help me
to channel this overflowing joy
through a hilarious generosity
to Your glory and honor.
Amen.*