

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-15
THE GRACE OF GIVING

It's a touchy subject, especially in church. You can't win on this subject: either "The Church is always going on about it, looking for more" or "we're never told what happens with it; they just keep us in the dark!" When we do talk about it, it is very hard not to make people feel guilty that they don't do better! I know of one Church which, every quarter, prints in its Church magazine, a list of what every member had done in this regard; there is a motivation there, but it's either guilt or competition! I'm not sure that either of these is a good motivation in Church. What is this touchy subject – money! Of course, straightaway we think of 'money' when we talk about giving; our Christian giving does include money, but is about more than money. People do react in lots of different ways when we mention 'giving': the instinctive reaction of some is that "the Church is always asking for money" so let's be clear today - I'm not asking you for money!

Why do we give? Why do we have an offering every week in our service? Why do we need money? The Church of Scotland last year embarked on a National Stewardship Campaign that will hit the streets in 2012. It was sparked by a concern about the financial condition of the Church nationally and a concern for the future viability and strength of the Church. Later in the year, we will be distributing a letter from the Moderator of the General Assembly commending this Stewardship Campaign and we will be taking some action to play our part by looking to improve our own congregational finances. But, to demonstrate that giving is not just about money, we will also be asking you about your gifts and abilities and opportunities for service in the next few weeks as part of a wider survey of the attitudes and needs of our members and the Kirk Session hopes that everyone who gets one of these forms because you are a member of congregation will respond in a way that helps us shape our ministry appropriately.

2 Corinthians 8,9 are the two chapters in the Bible where 'giving' is dealt with . There are other little bits, but here is Paul writing about giving in a fairly full way. Their giving grew out of a concern for others, especially for Christians who were poor and struggling. Through some of the New Testament letters, you can pick up a particular concern for Christians in Jerusalem because of a famine and they were hungry, so Paul and others were encouraging the Churches in Europe to hold a collection for their Christian brothers and sisters who were in need. In our Bible Study on Philippians, we have seen how the Christians in Philippi sent money to Paul as a gift when he was in prison so that he could have food to eat; Paul writes to say 'thank you' and express his appreciation of their partnership in the gospel. These are the Christians in Macedonia, who are generous Christians though not rich! You get the sense that the Christians in Corinth 'could do better'! So Paul writes about "the grace of giving", giving not as an obligation and duty, but giving as opportunity to show their love for Jesus and their love for others.

Giving is inspired by Jesus: Right in the middle of this piece about giving, come these magnificent words about Jesus. *"For you..." (8:9)* Be inspired in your giving by what Jesus has done for you. Paul uses the word 'rich' but he's not talking about money! He paints a picture of Jesus in all his glory – *"he was rich"* in glory, majesty, and in ways that we have no words to describe. This is Jesus, the Son of God, sharing the glory of God in heaven from before the beginning of the world; the One who was there at the creation of everything, full of power and majesty, worthy of worship, rich in glory. *"He became poor"* when He came into world; just coming into the world is enough to make Him poor; but the Christmas story tells us all about the poverty of His coming: the stable, no room at the inn, Joseph the village carpenter

from Nazareth, the shepherds came to visit Him in Bethlehem and it was a city of faded grandeur. This is all about becoming poor; then later, His poverty deepens as One who is treated unjustly, who is accused of things He didn't do, whose 'trial' is a miscarriage of justice, who dies for a crime He didn't commit, who suffers at the hands of cruel and jealous men. Jesus made Himself poor.

"So *that...*" (8:9b) In what ways are we rich? It's not financial. Some US preachers will tell you that the gospel is financial, that it makes you rich and prosperous financially and so they encourage people to come to faith and give them money; "be a Christian and God will make your bank balance soar!" No! The richness that Paul means is spiritual; the wealth that Jesus gives can't be put into the bank, but can be enjoyed in the heart. God forgives our sins because of Jesus; Jesus brings hope to our hearts; we are a people loved for ever by God; there is peace and joy for us as we believe; Jesus brings a new dimension to life that allows us to deal with difficult things by faith; He answers our prayers; we are His children and will one day share in the glory that is His all over again. That list has 8 or 9 items and its not the complete list! These are the blessings of God for us; these are the ways in which God has already made us rich in Christ. These are not to be discounted, but are the essence of life and faith; these give life its real, true value.

Because Jesus has done this for us, we give. This is why we give. We give as a response to Jesus and the gospel. Giving is not a duty or obligation forced upon us because we have to do it; giving at its best and highest is a response to the grace of God that has touched our lives. We know what Jesus has done; we know the stories of Jesus; we know the ways in which His grace has made a difference to our lives and the ways in which God has blessed us and so we give. Our giving comes from a deep sense of gratitude to God for His love for us, grace that loves us when we don't deserve it and from the desire to express that gratitude back! This has to be the foundation of all Christian giving. We know what God has done for us, so we give!

The giving of ourselves "*they gave...*" (8:5) Paul talks to the Christians in Corinth about Christians in other places, such as Philippi, Thessalonica. Their first giving was of themselves to the Lord. Mary, when the angel told her about her son, her first words were "*I am...*" (Luke 1:38) She gave herself to serve the Lord, to be His servant, to do His will. Frances Havergal wrote a classic hymn expressing this sense of giving: "*Take my life, Lord, let it be consecrated Lord to Thee*" This gives voice to the Christian giving him/herself to be the kind of person Jesus wants us to be. But the hymnwriter doesn't leave it there, at generalities; she goes on "*take my moments and my days, my hands, my feet, my voice, my intellect, my will, my heart, my love*" and in parts edited out by the newer editions of the hymnary "*my silver and my gold*" There is an all-inclusive sense of giving myself to Jesus my Lord, to serve Him, to do His will, to be the kind of person He wants me to be. The gospel touches (or should touch) every part of our lives, and every aspect of life, in some way or another, is lived in service to Jesus. How many of us use our voices to profess faith and to worship God on Sunday, but use the same voice to gossip, or bad-mouth a neighbour, or some other such during the week? So, says Paul to the Corinthians, "there are lots of things that you get right – "*just as...*" (8:7) Giving money is part of the giving of ourselves; this is our proper response to the gospel; we give because Jesus has loved us and has sacrificed Himself for us; we give ourselves to Him, to be His people.

The willingness to give – "*If the...*" (8:12) I find it sad when the editors of hymn-books decide that Christians shouldn't sing about giving "my silver and my gold". The gospel needs to touch our purses and our pockets and wallets and bank accounts. When the gospel touches our purses and pockets it creates a desire and a

willingness to give; it lets us see that giving is a grace and privilege. 50% of your givings to the Church in 2011 have gone to support my ministry and the ministry of people like me across Scotland. The Church of Scotland is committed to take the gospel to every community of Scotland and not every community is able to support such a ministry on its own, so people like us, who have more, are asked to support ministry in these other places. The willingness to give is the beginning of our response, willing to be part of this national, indeed world-wide, enterprise that is the Church. So when I conduct a school assembly and tell children a Bible story or reflect on Christmas or Easter, or when I visit a bereaved family and conduct a funeral, or when I lead a Bible Study or Prayer time, or when someone else does these things in a remote part of the country, or in poor community of the city, you are there by your giving; you are partners in the gospel by your giving; this work of ministry is only possible when the people of God are willing to give, willing to let the gospel touch our pockets and purses to give money.

Giving is a privilege – “*entirely on...*” (8:3bf) Is that how you would see Christian giving? A privilege or is it a duty? A delight or a burden? The Christians in Corinth were giving to help their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem; they sent them money to buy food so that they could eat! At Christmas, in our gift service, we gave toys and presents and other things to the Salvation Army to help families in the city who are poor, so that they might have some kind of Christmas present for their children. Or our giving once a month to CHO and the extra money help support one teacher in the Safe Haven School who serves poor children and children whose parents have died or abandoned them, to give them an education so that they might one day be able to fulfil their dreams and live a life full of faith and full of dignity. Es-team and the work of SU in Edinburgh: how many children and young people in our city know nothing of Jesus, who have no connection with the Church or the gospel and the SU worker in the school might be the only person to tell them of Jesus and that SU worker might just be the way in which God changes that young person's life for good. What a privilege we have to give; our giving changes lives.

I'm not going to tell you how much to give; you have to work that out for yourself. Paul would tell us to give according to our ability to give. What I will say is that our giving is inspired by Jesus, by His giving of Himself to us and our world, One rich in splendour makes Himself poor, comes into our world, suffers, dies, so that we might be rich beyond measure in grace, love, peace, hope, joy. His giving should be an inspiration to us; we give in response to Jesus. We give of ourselves, the Lord's servants; there is a willingness to give in our hearts; giving is a grace and a privilege. This is the foundation of our giving: so when the Church comes asking about giving of your time or talents by which you might serve, you can answer as seems right to you; so when the Church comes talking about money, you can answer as seems right to you. Let me finish by quoting another famous hymn-writer, Isaac Watts: his most famous, classic hymn is *When I survey the wondrous cross* and its last words are these, having made us think about cross and what it cost he says *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.* (Hymn 392) What shall we give to One who has given everything for us?