

For Your Great Generosity

by

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October 24, 2021

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God

through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Hal Hershfield is a psychologist who teaches marketing and behavioral decision making at UCLA's School of Management. He has conducted research on this question: Given the choice between having more time or more money, which would you pick? Would you take a better paying job that would require more nights at the office? Or would you forsake the job offer in order to have more leisurely time? Obviously, this question is addressed to people who have the luxury of thinking about the value of time versus the value of financial resources – if given the choice – and not addressed to people who don't have enough food to eat.

His research on this particular question actually grew out of his own life experience. He was invited to teach a weekend seminar out of state, but he had a three-month-old baby girl at home. His seminar pay would contribute to some costs of raising the child, but the job would require two days of not cooing and ahhing and bonding with the baby. The value of money is fairly easy to quantify but he found it harder to put a value on the time that would be lost. So he put the question to more than four thousand Americans of different ages and income levels, different occupations and family situations. The study found that most people valued money more than time. Sixty-four percent chose money. But then the survey respondents were asked to report their level of happiness and life satisfaction, and they found that the respondents who chose time over money were statistically happier and more satisfied with life than those who chose money.

So, here is the interesting aspect of the study for us one week before Stewardship Dedication Sunday, as we ponder our tangible financial commitments of our pledges for the coming year. The research ultimately showed that those who valued time over money thought about their resources differently and had different intentions for how they would spend either money or time. Among people at comparable income levels, those who chose money were fixated on not having enough, with less thought to how they might spend it.

On the other hand, people who focused on time, thought about how they would spend their time and focused on other people rather than themselves. They thought about having more time – not only for family and friendships, but also to volunteer, to cultivate a hobby with others, to serve in the community. ¹

Giving themselves over to good causes increased their life satisfaction. Now, the truth is church stewardship, of course, is about giving our time and our money! And there is a theological rationale that differs a bit from the business school's Management Professor's research on the value people place on time or money. But both the modern day PhD psychologist and the Apostle Paul are going after insight into the quality of one's life. The Apostle Paul put it this way: *the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

Paul is not just asking for more time or more money, but is inviting the Corinthians to nurture among themselves a generous spirit which would pervade every aspect of life. To be sure, as we considered last week, Paul does have a specific campaign goal in mind. He is trying to raise funds to support the poor among the congregation of early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. In today's reading, this second half of his stewardship sermon to the church at Corinth, Paul is endeavoring to make two points.

Point Number One is that God enables generosity. That may sound like a benign "Christianity 101" kind of teaching moment. But remember the Corinthians are Greek and are therefore prone to be influenced by prevailing philosophical leanings of their culture – specifically the Hellenistic notions of "self-sufficiency" and "personal contentment." These philosophical heirs of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were not monolithic in their thinking, but reading between the lines of Paul's letters you can tell he was arguing against a common notion that having enough resources enables one to be independent of other people; and when one exercises enough self-discipline,

¹ Hal Hershfield and Cassie Holmes, "What Should You Choose: Time or Money?", NYTimes.com, 9/25/16, and halhershfield.com.

one can reach a level of self-sufficiency and therein lies personal contentment. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

But Paul has an argument with these prevailing philosophical winds and says that it is by God's grace, and not our own strength, that we are able to be content, whatever the outward conditions of our existence. The purpose of Christian contentment is not to render us independent of one another, but to enable us to relate to others, to acknowledge our interdependence, and to share what we have so that everyone has access to the abundant life given by God to all the children of God. In their need the Jerusalem church is blessing the well-to-do Corinthians with a reason to give; and the Corinthians need the Jerusalem church to encourage their spirit of generosity. By bringing these diverse peoples into relationship through Christ, God enabled their generosity. That's Point Number One.

Paul's Second Point is this: Generosity glorifies God.² Just as giving of their resources to others is an act of grace, so also is the receipt of such goodness – an act of grace. For those in the Jerusalem Church who are helped by the offering will properly direct their thanks, not to the Corinthians, but to God, the real source of the benefit, the source of all goodness, the enabler of generosity. As far as Paul is concerned, we give of our time, our finances, our creativity, our love, our imagination, our spiritual gifts, ourselves because we have been gifted beyond measure by the grace of God. God enables generosity; generosity in turn glorifies God.

So what is the stewardship message that arises out of Paul's sermon to the Corinthians for Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church in 2021? It is a profound word of thanksgiving. Thank you for responding to God's inexpressible grace with your extraordinary generosity throughout this unprecedented season of the pandemic. When we were shut down, and unable to gather during the most isolating season of 2020, the pastors and church leaders kept using language

² Ted Wardlaw, "Forming: A Generous Spirit," Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta.

to convey that even though we were apart from one another we could still be the church together. During this season of incredible uncertainty, this congregation has been the church together in generosity.

Let me give you just a few very specific examples. First, we gave more to the annual stewardship campaign than we had pledged to give. But also over and above our regular support of the church we gave to special offerings at unprecedented levels.

In 2019, the gifts to the Hunger Fund totaled \$57,000. In 2020, this congregation's gifts to the Hunger Fund totaled \$138,000, a pandemic increase of \$81,000.

In 2019 – gifts to the Advent Gift Market which supports various benevolent missions totaled \$26,000. In 2020, the Advent Gift Market raised \$44,500, an increase of more than \$18,000.

In addition to our budgeted benevolences, special funds in the Foundation like the Shaull and Bay funds contributed an additional \$160,000 to good causes abroad and local urban work serving communities in need.

Further, over and above annual stewardship, the receipt on pledges to the capital campaign have been paid in a timely fashion, so that even well before the end of the five-year span of the campaign, we have been able to do this major renovation work without having to borrow any money to fund the construction costs. The capital campaign is not yet over, and there are pledges still to come in which will help us complete all the goals of the campaign, but not having to borrow a bridge loan for the construction was an unexpected blessing. Your financial support for the work of this church has been extraordinarily generous. Thank you.

Finally, we all know that we are a relatively affluent congregation in one of the most affluent zip codes in the country. But not every one of us is a person of great wealth and we are privileged to have among our fold incredibly generous folks of more modest means. My friend and colleague on

the staff, our Director of Finance, Sarah Miciek, has a favorite story that makes this point. When folks make benevolent commitments to the church in their estate planning, we typically receive a copy of their Last Will and Testament. In recent years we received the copy of the Will of one of our members who lived a good long life which Sarah claims is her favorite ever. The woman who died left her mother's three-tenths of a carat diamond ring to her niece. She left a strand of pearls to a friend. And she left the rest of her estate to the church – \$870.20. You'd be hard pressed to find a more generous gift than that.

Friends, this has been a long and stressful season from which we are still only slowly emerging. But what we have given, not only in financial support but also in extraordinary gifts of time: in your service and your singing; in teaching and tutoring children; making casseroles for those living with food insecurity; delivering flowers to the homebound; visiting the lonely; supporting one another in seasons of grief and moments of trial... all of that and so much more has enabled us to be the church which the Apostle Paul calls us to be sowing a harvest of righteousness. The surpassing grace of God has been given to us. God enables our generosity. Our generosity in turn glorifies God. That is certainly true of this congregation just now.

Thanks be to God for God's inexpressible gift!

AMEN.