

Giving to the Lord's Work



Of all of the spiritual topics that we might address, one of the most sensitive is giving. First of all, it's about money, which always has been very important to people. Second, though, the Holy Spirit's words on this subject have been misrepresented and abused for 2000 years. In 1 Timothy 6, Paul writes about preachers who saw godliness as a means of gain, and sadly, there are untold thousands of religious leaders who still think this way today. As a result, whenever we raise the subject with a new convert or with brethren in general, there is always the suspicion that the preacher is motivated by selfishness rather than love of the truth.

This is unfortunate, but it must not deter us from teaching that truth. Those who recently have obeyed the gospel need to understand what their financial responsibilities are, and more mature Christians need to be reminded. For the next lesson in our half-hour study series, then, let's consider giving to the Lord's work.

The first thing that we must teach when it comes to giving is WHY it is important. Frequently, those who collect the contribution will talk about returning to God a portion of that with which He has blessed us, and that's true, but it's incomplete. Our motivations for generosity should go much deeper than that.

As evidence, consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:8-9. In context, Paul is urging the Corinthians to contribute to the collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem, and

he tells them that their example must be Jesus. We don't normally think of Jesus as a generous giver, yet Paul points out that that's exactly what He was. Before He came to earth, Jesus had everything. He was rich on a scale that makes the concept of riches meaningless.

However, even though Jesus was rich, He made Himself poor. He left the glories of heaven behind for life down here in the mud with us. Indeed, He surrendered His life on the cross, so that the One who once had everything was left with nothing. Why? So that through His poverty He could make us rich, so that we could share in the glories of heaven with Him.

If we want to be like Jesus, then, we will seek to give as generously as He gave. We will view the contribution as an opportunity to imitate His self-sacrificing love. When you get right down to it, giving is about love. It's about love for the poor brethren here and around the world whom this church helps. It's about love for the children who are taught in our Bible classes and for the brethren who are built up in the faith. It's about love for the sinners who so desperately need to hear the gospel. When we give generously, that reveals our love. When we don't, well, that reveals our love too.

Second, let's consider WHEN we should give. Once again, the apostle Paul helps us out here, in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. There are several things that are worth noting about this text. The first is that this collection is supposed to take place on the first day of every week. Interestingly, it is the only thing that we are directly commanded to do every Sunday. We only have an example of brethren sharing in the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, and preaching, singing, and prayer can occur at any time.

We need to be careful in our attitudes toward these things. I think that sometimes, we can fall into the habit of thinking of the other expressions of worship as these wonderful, exalted activities, whereas the contribution is this distasteful necessity that we do because we have to, but we want to get it out of the way as quickly as possible because we're embarrassed about it. Brethren, that's dead wrong. Giving is no less a sign of godliness than any of those other things, and it's just as important to Him!

Second, Paul says that each is to give as he may prosper. To put things another way, our contribution is supposed to be proportional to our income. If some Christian is unemployed and doesn't have any income, then because he isn't prospering, God doesn't expect him to give. It is when we have the means to give but choose not to that our non-giving reveals a heart problem.

Third, notice the purpose of the collection. Paul says it's so that no collections will have to be made when he comes. In other words, because there is a big need in Jerusalem, Paul wants the Corinthians to get this money together bit by bit, over time. That way, when Paul returns to Corinth, the whole sum will be waiting for

him, and the Corinthians won't have to scurry around checking under couch cushions for loose change.

From this, we see that one of the purposes of the collection is to gather together money for large expenses in the future. It's 100 percent legitimate for a church to have a treasury with money sitting in it, against the day when a cyclone wipes out the brethren in Zimbabwe or the septic-system pumps at the church building give out, to name a couple of the expenses the Jackson Heights church has seen this year. Not only is it authorized to store up money like that, it's prudent!

Finally, let's turn to the question of HOW MUCH. Look at 2 Corinthians 9:6-8. Once again, there are several things in the passage that are worth attending to. The first is that we must give as we have decided in our hearts. We can't go through our week spending, spending, spending, and then when Sunday rolls around, God gets whatever is left in our purses and our wallets. That's not deciding in our hearts. That's letting our materialism decide for us. Instead, we need to put our giving as the top line item in our budgets and make the rest of the budget work around it.

Second, notice that giving as we have decided in our hearts does not give us a monetary amount, either absolutely or as a percentage. In fact, if we go through the whole New Testament, we will never see any particular figure attached to giving. Tithing, giving 10 percent of our income, was an Old-Testament practice that has not been carried over from the Law of Moses.

How much we give is entirely up to us. I once had a sister ask me if she should give as a percentage of her gross income or of her net. I told her only that she should give whatever she could give cheerfully. The only guidance I will give a new Christian, or indeed any of you, is to look into your hearts, consider what the Lord has done for you, and return to Him what you know is right.

Third, though, notice that God promises that whatever we give, we won't suffer because of our giving. This isn't a promise that He will make us rich. However, it is a guarantee that if we are generous in our contribution to Him, He will make sure that we always have the means to be generous. When we are contributing, we don't have to worry about the consequences. Instead, we can trust in Him.

M. W. Bassford