

“IT’S MINE, ISN’T IT?”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

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The most personal and private subject in American conversation is money. Americans seem more inclined to divulge intimate sexual details than to disclose their financial affairs.

When I was a young pastor I went to visit missionaries in the Philippines. While there I spoke at the Diliman Bible Church in Manila on a Sunday morning. The church was located close to a national university campus, and quite a few students attended the service. Afterward a student said to me, “May I ask what you earn per year?” I don’t remember what I actually said, but I do remember what I wanted to say on first impulse (It begins with “mind” and ends with “business). Then I realized that in their culture it was quite appropriate to ask that question.

But in America it’s considered rude. It’s impolite; it’s offensive, and downright cheeky.

In his book, *The Number* Lee Eisenberg reports his research into people’s attitudes about their money—how much they have and how much they think they need. He found that people refuse to divulge how much money they have socked away. One person he asked said, “Some things are not meant to be shared.” (p.8). He wrote “(Financial planners and accountants) hold backstage passes to our psyches. . . If you ever think it would be fun to be a shrink, but you can’t hack medical school, let alone being awakened in the middle of the night by a frantic patient, you might consider a career in financial planning.” A financial planner delves just as deeply into a person’s psyche as a psychiatrist does.

People don’t want anyone nosing into the inner sanctum of their lives, where the money is.

- That’s the excuse some people give for not going to church. “In church they ask you for money. They expect you to give a slice of what you earn. Isn’t church just supposed to be about God and love and potluck dinners and bingo?”

People who belong to a church are just as fussy about money. Money is the most sensitive subject for them as well.

- Personal questions about money tend to annoy people.

Let me suggest a few frank questions people ask, or would like to ask, about the church and money.

1. What right does any church have to tell me what to do with my money? It’s mine, isn’t it?
2. Why should I give if I’m barely getting by on what I earn?
3. Are Christians supposed to give money to the church because having too much money is spiritually harmful?
4. If I give generously to the church will God bless me with more money than I started with?
5. The Bible says God loves a cheerful giver. Sometimes I don’t feel cheerful about giving. Should I still give if I’m grouchy?
6. Why should anybody know what I give to the church? It’s not their business! Didn’t Jesus say you shouldn’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?

I think we could call those “nagging questions.” They’re about giving our money away, and that nags at us.

There’s too much in those questions for a quick, easy answer, but I want to say something about the last one.

Some people use Jesus’ statement about the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing to support their view that no one should know how much anybody else gives.

That’s not what Jesus was talking about. There is nothing in the Bible that implies our money is no one else’s business. It’s God’s business!

- Listen to the actual words of Jesus on this. It’s in Matthew 6:1-4.

¹ *Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.*

² *So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.*

³ *But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*

⁴ *so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

(Matthew 6:1-4)

Jesus condemned hypocrisy. Jesus warned the people not to show off how much they gave as a badge of pride. He never intended it as an excuse for hiding the truth about what they give, or don’t give. It’s a warning against bragging, not an encouragement to conceal a lack of generosity.

- Now let's get to our theme. It's the first nagging question: "It's mine, isn't it? So why should anybody tell me what to do with my money?"

Our Bible text this morning is 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.

The Apostle Paul had asked the Christians in Corinth to give money to help suffering Christians in Judea.

¹ *And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*

² *Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

³ *For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,*

⁴ *they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*

⁵ *And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*

⁶ *So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.*

⁷ *But just as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

⁸ *I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.*

⁹ *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

¹⁰ *And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.*

¹¹ *Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.*

¹² *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.*

¹³ *Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.*

¹⁴ *At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,*

¹⁵ *as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 the Apostle Paul gives us instructions about the kind of giving that is acceptable to God.

I. GIVE GENEROUSLY. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

God is the ultimate Giver. The Bible makes this clear.

This divine trait of giving generously and extravagantly is called *grace*.

God used the word *grace* to describe his love in action for a world of people hopelessly condemned by the curse of sin.

Jesus Christ is grace personified. He is God the Son who left his heavenly majesty to come into our world.

On the Cross Jesus suffered the penalty for our sins. He gave his life for us, and he took it up again in the triumphant resurrection. And so he is the one in whom, by faith, we have forgiveness of all our sins and the assurance of eternal life.

- This is the gospel of grace. It reveals God's amazing generosity.

God's people are supposed to reflect his grace by being givers.

¹ *And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*

Paul actually calls giving a "grace." At the end of verse 7 Paul says, '*... see that you also abound in this grace.*'

Giving generously is supposed to be a distinguishing mark of God's people. We're supposed to be known for it.

- The poor Macedonian Christians had begged for the privilege of giving.

² *Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

³ *For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,*

⁴ *they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*

Paul called the attention of the Corinthian Christians to the example set by the Macedonian Christians.

- Among Christians it's not unusual that those who have the least are often the most generous givers.

On several occasions in Asia and Central Europe I have been a guest in the homes of people who had very little.

Yet they gave their best. They set a meal before me that they would never have prepared just for

themselves. And I had to honor them by accepting it. If I hadn't I would have insulted them and robbed them of the grace of giving. That was so awkward for me, because I knew how little they had.

- Paul was never embarrassed to ask Christians to give generously as an expression of God's grace.

There's a little saying that helps to explain what giving means to Christians: *'Collecting money in the church is God's way of keeping worship from degenerating into frothy, empty sentimentality.'* (Ben Patterson)

The generosity of the Macedonian Christians had surprised Paul.

⁵ *And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*

Pay attention to this little clause in this verse (5): *' . . . they gave themselves first to the Lord . . .'*

You cannot give as a "grace" until you first give yourself to the Lord.

- God wants us to acknowledge his rights over us and over everything we have.

One proof that you have truly given yourself to the Lord is the grace of giving.

II. GIVE ZEALOUSLY. 2 Corinthians 8:6-11

The Christians in Macedonia were poor, but they gave generously and zealously. In contrast, the Corinthian Christians were not poor.

⁶ *So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.*

⁷ *But just as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

Let's dig into verse 7 a little. Giving is not something a Christian may choose to do instead of serving God in other ways.

It's in addition to all the other ways we serve in the church.

I knew a man who said, "I don't give funds to the church. I give in other ways. I give my time; I give my ministry of teaching. I give a lot to the church, so I shouldn't also have to give my money."

Paul clearly says in verse 7 that giving is not instead of; it's along with other forms of service.

If you teach or you serve in other ways in the church, but you don't practice the grace of giving, you have a major problem in your Christian life.

Paul speaks about the essence of the Christian life—your faith, your speech, your knowledge (of the truth), and your love.

He says if your faith is genuine, you will practice the grace of giving. He puts giving right up there with the core elements of what it means to be a Christian.

- I wish every Christian would grasp how vital the grace of giving is.

It's not an option. It's an essential indicator of genuine faith. If you excel in any aspect of the Christian life, you must also excel in the grace of giving.

- Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of generosity and our greatest inspiration for giving generously.

⁸ *I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.*

⁹ *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

Jesus our Savior is the standard in generosity.

He willingly laid aside his divine glory and came to this earth to suffer the penalty for our sins on the cross.

That was the greatest sacrifice ever.

- Paul wrote in verse 8, *'I'm not commanding you to give'*

The grace of giving is our joyful expression of Christian love. It's not something we do only because we were ordered to do it.

- Paul wrote, *'I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.'* (v.8)

Paul compared the giving of the Corinthians with that of the Macedonians, and ultimately with Christ's sincerity.

There's a fable about the barnyard rooster who roamed beyond his normal range one day and discovered an enormous egg. With great difficulty he managed to roll it back to his henhouse, not realizing it was an ostrich egg. He called all the hens together to see the great egg. Then he said to them, "Ladies, please understand that I am not complaining about your work. I just want you to see what others are doing elsewhere."

Paul the rooster rolled the great egg down from Macedonia to the church in Corinth to show the Christians there what the churches to the north had given.

How you give—and whether you give generously—is an indicator of your love for Jesus Christ and for your fellow Christians.

- The Macedonian church had it right. Even in their own poverty, they responded to God's grace with generosity that came from a willing spirit and a loving heart.

¹⁰ *And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.*

¹¹ *Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.*

Zeal is excellent, but without follow-through it's worthless.

- Almost a year had passed since Paul's earlier letter to Corinth.

The Corinthian Christians had been the first to make a financial commitment to the collection for the poor in Judea (10).

So Paul says, *'You had noble intentions. You led things off. Now I appeal to you to fulfill your responsibility. Renew your zeal by giving generously.'*

III. GIVE PROPORTIONATELY. 2 Corinthians 8:12-15

The grace of giving will never land you in financial difficulties.

¹² *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.*

Giving according to God's plan is sensible. You can't give what you don't have.

When the Lord tests your generosity, he looks not just at what you give, but also at how much you keep for yourself.

Jesus watched a poor widow put only two small copper coins into the temple treasury while the rich people threw in large amounts. *'Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others."* (Mark 12:41ff.)

- I know that some people think, "I make so little. The amount I can give is so small, it won't make a difference. So I won't even bother to give."

That's not the point. The main reason each of us gives is because we need to give as our expression of God's grace.

- God doesn't want some people to suffer because they don't have enough, while others keep hoarding up more than they need.

¹³ *Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.*

¹⁴ *At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,*

¹⁵ *as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

There is something obscene about Christians living extravagantly while others are starving.

The same can be said about Christians enjoying the spiritual blessings of God's grace while caring nothing about the millions of people in spiritual darkness and hopelessness.

In verse 15 Paul alludes to God's provision of manna for the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16). Nobody was allowed to hoard it up.

God made sure everybody received just enough.

- If every Christian excels in the grace of giving, just as we are to excel in the crucial matters of faith, and in our knowledge of God's truth, and in love, then everyone will have enough. That is God's plan.

Each Christian has a responsibility to give, and to give responsibly.

Let us excel in faith, in speech, in knowing his truth, in complete earnestness of life, and in the grace of giving. Are you willing to make this commitment to our Lord?

- Maybe God's word has had an impact on you this morning, and you want to do something to demonstrate the genuineness of your faith by practicing the grace of giving.