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Stewardship: A Matter of Thanksgiving
2 Corinthians 8:1-9; 9:6-15

I know that the holiday coming up this week is Thanksgiving, but let me talk about Christmas gifts for just a minute. After all, this Friday—Black Friday, as they call it—is one of the biggest gift-shopping days of the year.

Why do you give Christmas gifts to the people you give them to? In the case of your immediate family, you probably give them gifts because you want to, don't you? You want to show them how much you love them and appreciate them. So you give them gifts. The same is probably true for your close friends, isn't it?

Do you sometimes feel obligated to give someone a gift because you think that person will probably give you a gift? If the person gives you a gift and you don't have one to give him or her in return, you're concerned the person might be offended or have hurt feelings, right? And if you give them a gift, and they don't have one to give you, they might be embarrassed, just as you would be . . . So next year—well, you know how complicated gift-giving etiquette can be! And the truth is that while some people give a gift expecting one in return, sometimes people just like to give something to someone to express their appreciation and affection.

Thanksgiving as a motive

Giving can be a powerful expression of thanksgiving, can't it?

Do you remember the episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* when Andy has come to the filling station and finds Gomer asleep while a fire is beginning to smolder in the barrel of oily rags? Andy wakes Gomer and puts the fire out, then tells Gomer how dangerous it was. Gomer decides that Andy has saved his life, and sets about to try to do everything for him—wash his car, chop his wood, watch out for Opie, even help Aunt Bee bake. One morning he even comes in with a big mess of fish and presents them to Andy at the breakfast table.

Andy tries to tell Gomer that he doesn't need to do all this, that what he did was really nothing. Gomer responds, "You mean my life's worth nothing?" The only way Andy can finally get Gomer to stop is to set up a situation where Andy seems to be in danger so Gomer can save *his* life. Despite the fact that it backfires and Andy ends up saving Gomer again, Andy turns the situation around so it will look like Gomer saved him—so everything would be squared between them and they could go back to the way things were.

Gomer wanted to do all these things for Andy because Andy had saved his life. He was truly *grateful* to him. As Gomer put it, nothing was too good for his "lifesaver man."

This text we're looking at this morning is a familiar one. We've looked at it together several times over the years. Let me remind you a little of the details.

Paul had been working among the churches he had established to gather an offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem. Now the church in Jerusalem was made up almost entirely of Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. Paul's churches, on the other hand, were made up mainly of Gentiles who had come to trust Jesus as Lord and Savior. There were a few Jewish converts, but most were Gentiles.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were experiencing extreme poverty. Paul wanted to accomplish two things by gathering this offering for the Jerusalem church. First, he truly wanted to provide help to the saints in Jerusalem who were in such genuinely dire need. Second, he hoped that this sincere gesture would develop and strengthen the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Paul had talked with the Corinthians a year earlier about this effort, and they enthusiastically backed it, promising generous support for it. In the meantime, there had been problems in the church that led to a severe conflict with Paul. Now the conflict had been resolved, and Paul was calling on them to complete what they had started.

Now to encourage the Corinthians, Paul appealed to a couple of different motivations.

The first one was something of a friendly rivalry with the Christians in Macedonia, in the northern part of Greece (Corinth was in Achaia, the southern part of Greece). This was a common motivation in that day just as it is today. The church in Corinth had several well-to-do members, and was located in a seaport city with a thriving economy. But the Macedonian Christians were nearly as poor as the Jerusalem Christians. Yet they had given generously, even out of their great poverty! In fact, Paul said that the Macedonians had *begged* for the opportunity to contribute to this offering. So Paul told the Corinthians, "Now look, you've made a generous pledge. I'm sending Titus to supervise the fulfillment of it. Go ahead and gather it all so you won't have to get it together when I come. And make sure you've got all you promised, because I've been bragging on you to the Macedonians, and they've responded so sacrificially. If any of them comes with me, I would hate for you to be humiliated before them!"

The second motivation Paul appealed to was the grace of Jesus Christ—"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" (8:9).¹

Out of his incredible grace, our Lord Jesus Christ was willing to lay aside his glory and wealth that far surpassed any glory or wealth that this world can offer. As the ancient hymn Paul quoted in Philippians 2:5-11 put it, he emptied himself, took the form of a slave, was born in human likeness, was found in human form, and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on the cross—the most humiliating, despicable death a human could die in his day. And he did all this so that we through his poverty might share in his heavenly riches!

Obviously, what Paul was doing with this part of his appeal was to try to stir a spirit of *thanksgiving* in the hearts of the Corinthians. With all Christ has done, the appropriate response was thanksgiving, and Christian generosity is an appropriate expression of that thanks. In other words, *thanksgiving is a powerful motive for our faithful stewardship* of all that God has given us.

Wasn't that what the psalmist was saying in Psalm 116 that we read together earlier in our service today? As he remembered how he had called on the LORD and the LORD had heard him and delivered him, he said,

How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD.
I will fulfill my vows to the LORD
in the presence of all his people
I will sacrifice a thank offering to you
and call on the name of the LORD (116:12-14, 17).

With all God has done for us through our Lord Jesus Christ, with all that he promises us in him, how can we *not* be thankful? How can we not be good stewards of all he has entrusted to us, using it all wisely and giving a generous portion to his work in this world, especially through his church? There are other ways we should express our thanksgiving as well—our worship, our prayers, our service, our devotion to Christ—but our giving is a powerful way to express our thanks to God for his grace in Christ!

Or let me put it another way. When you look at the proportion of your giving to the Lord compared to your income, what does it say about your thankfulness to God?

There's no way we could ever even begin to repay God for all his goodness to us. We simply can't do it. But we *can* express our thankfulness to him in many ways. And not the least of those ways is through our generosity as we give to the Lord's work, especially through his church.

Thanksgiving as a product

But you know, thanksgiving is not only a motive for our generosity; *our faithful stewardship produces thanksgiving in others.*

In 9:6-15, Paul offered a beautiful meditation on Christian generosity, expounding on the basic principle that whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, while the one who sows generously will reap generously. He affirmed that God loves a cheerful giver.

As you've heard me say before, I think it's more than interesting that the Greek word for cheerful (*hilaron*) is the same word we get our English word "hilarious" from. Think about it: God loves a hilarious giver—one who gives without grudging, who enjoys giving, indeed, who has a ball giving!

Then Paul reminded the Corinthian believers of God's provision, that he will supply everything they need to be this kind of cheerful and generous givers. But Paul doesn't stop there. Look at what he said in 9:11—"You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God."

He went on to tell them that their generosity would not only supply the needs of the saints but would also overflow "in many expressions of thanks to God," and that people would praise God for their obedience and generosity (9:12-13). And then Paul broke out in his own thanksgiving: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (9:15).

Do you see what he's saying? When our gratitude to God for all his grace and blessings moves us to generosity in our stewardship of the possessions he has entrusted to us, our generosity produces thanksgiving in those who benefit from it.

That person who hears the gospel and believes in Christ is thankful for the ministry that brought him the Word of the Lord.

The one who was hungry or without proper clothing or medical care is grateful that someone gave to the Lord in gratitude to meet the needs of those who couldn't provide for themselves at the moment.

A mother in Africa is thankful that someone who serves this Jesus she just heard about was generous enough to provide a mosquito net for her family in hopes of saving her children from the deadly ravages of malaria.

The shut-in person who so desperately wants to be a part of our worship but can't be physically present is grateful that our members give to have our services broadcast on the radio.

Our missionaries from here to the ends of the earth give thanks for the generosity of those who send them so that they might spread the gospel through word and deed to those who might not otherwise hear.

Paul told the Corinthians that thanksgiving is both a motive for and a product of generosity. It's a wonderful cycle, isn't it? *Thanksgiving motivates our stewardship, and our stewardship produces thanksgiving.*

Andréa Nannette Mejia told her story of thankfulness in *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul*.² Her husband had left her and their three young children several months earlier. Now it was the day before Thanksgiving, and the two older children had the flu. It was a cool wet day, and she was running out of liquids for the children. Looking in her purse, she realized she was down to \$2.50—and that was supposed to last the rest of the month. And then the phone rang.

It was the secretary from their former church telling her that they had been thinking about her and the children and had something they wanted to give them from the congregation. She said she'd drop by to pick it up on the way to the market to pick up some juice and soup for the children.

The secretary met her at the door with a gift envelope. As she gave it to Andréa she said, "We think of you and the kids often, and you are in our hearts and prayers. We love you." Andréa said she opened the envelope and found two grocery certificates for \$20 each. She was so moved she broke down and cried. She thanked the secretary and asked her to thank the church.

She went on to the store and got some things she needed for the children. At the counter, the cashier rang up her purchases, and they came to a little over \$14.00. She handed the cashier one of the certificates. The cashier took it, then turned around for what seemed like a long time. Andréa thought something was wrong. She told the cashier it was from the church, since they knew she was now a single parent trying to make ends meet.

The cashier turned back around and said, "Honey, this is wonderful. Do you have a turkey?" Andréa told her no, but it didn't really matter since her children were sick anyway. The cashier gave her the change from the certificate, looked at her and said, "Honey, I can't tell you exactly why right now, but I want you to go back into the store and buy a turkey, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, or anything else you need for a Thanksgiving dinner." Andréa was shocked and humbled to tears.

Feeling awkward, she went and got the items and brought them to the same cashier. The cashier looked at her with tears in her eyes and said, "Now I can tell you. This morning I prayed that I could help someone today, and you walked through my line." She took \$20.00 from her own purse, paid for the groceries, and gave Andréa the change.

Andréa said, “As I walked to my car, I was overwhelmed by this stranger’s love and by the realization that God loves my family too, and shows us his love through this stranger’s and my church’s kind deeds We all ate the goodness of the Lord’s bounty—and our community’s love. Our hearts were truly filled with thanks.”

Are you thankful? Will others be thankful because of you?

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

² Jack Canfield et al., eds., *Chicken Soup for the Christian Soul* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1997), 97-99.