

SERENDIPITY #3
THE RICHES OF POVERTY
II Corinthians 8 - 9

I. Introduction.

The movie *Schindler's List* tells the story of how Oskar Schindler used his money to buy from the Nazis the lives of many Jews. In one of the closing scenes Oskar looks at his expensive car and his gold pin and feels deep regret that he did not give more of his wealth to save more lives. What about you? When you reach the end of life's journey, will you too look back and wish you had given more? What regrets will you have?

Our study today examines giving. Not as a duty, but as a privilege. One of Paul's serendipitous discoveries was that it was indeed more blessed to give than to receive. This was a surprise to him. And it is to most of us as well!

A. Why People Don't Give.

- 1) **Selfishness**. "If I give my money away then I won't be able to have what I want for myself. What's mine is mine."
- 2) **Fear**. "I'm already on a tight budget. If I give more money away we simply couldn't survive."
- 3) **Unbelief**. "Even if God did want me to give more, I can't... I won't. We'd go in the poor house. Who would take care of us?"
- 4) **Lack of love**. "The needs around me are not my problem."
- 5) **Undisciplined lifestyle**. "There's always too much month left at the end of the money."
- 6) **Financial hardship**. "We're really in a crunch. I just can't afford to give now, but I'd give more if I had more."

B. Biblical Economics 101.

- 1) The Bible has **a lot to say** about money.
 - Some 2,000 references to money and possessions.
 - Sixteen of Jesus' parables (out of 38) deal with how we handle money.
 - About 1 out of 10 verses in the Gospels are about money and possessions.

- 2) Money is a profoundly **spiritual** issue.

One of the best indicators of your true spiritual condition is your **checkbook**. How we use our money is perhaps the most accurate indicator of: What we really **trust**. What we really **hope for**. What we really **love**.

- 3) Who's stuff is it anyway? Who's the **Owner**?

Remember the seagulls in the movie *Finding Nemo*? "Mine. Mine."

- *The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it (Psalm 24:1).*
- *... for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine (Psalm 50:10-11).*
- *The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty (Haggai 2:8).*

Some people think that if they give God 10% then they can do whatever they want with the remaining 90%. The question is not *How much of my money should I give to God?* but rather *How much of **God's money** should I **keep for myself**?*

- 4) The real issue is not money but my **attitude** toward money.

⁹ *People who **want to get rich** fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.* ¹⁰ *For the **love of money** is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs (I Timothy 6:9-10).*

Seen in this light, poor people may be as guilty of **misplaced love** as rich people.

- 5) My heart **follows** my money... not vice versa.

We naively assume that our money follows our heart, that is, our loves (heart) determine where we put our money. Jesus gives a much more profound analysis of the true reality. *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)*. In other words, my heart always goes where I put **my money**... not vice versa! If you want to see where my real heart is - read my checkbook.

6) Prosperity is a **test**.

When God gives more money most people think, "This is a blessing" when they should think, "This is a test."

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land—a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills;⁸ a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey;⁹ a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills.

¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹² Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Deut. 8:7-14).

"God prospers me not to raise my standard of **living** but to raise my standard of **giving**." (Randy Alcorn. *The Treasure Principle*. p. 73).

7) **Tithing** is a good place to start.

- A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. (Leviticus 27:30)
- *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse... (Malachi 3:10).*

In the Old Testament the offerings demanded by the law actually came to about 23% of a person's income. But the New Testament principle seems to be not so much tithing as proportionate giving.

- On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. (I Cor. 16:2)
- For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability... (II Cor. 8:3).

A tithing is 10%. Studies show that the average American evangelical gives less than 3%. R. G. Le Tourneau (owner of a large earth-moving equipment business) learned that he could live on 10% of his income and give away 90%.

Tithing should not be seen as a legalistic demand but a divine suggestion as a great **place to start**.

8) Giving money is symbolic. Giving **ourselves** is what really matters!

- *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer **your bodies** as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship (Rom 12:1).*
- *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. (II Cor. 8:5).*

Story told by George W. Truett years ago of an offering taken in large wicker baskets. A small boy had no money. On an impulse, he climbed into the basket himself! At first the usher tried to make him get out. Then decided to simply bring the basket forward to the altar of the church... boy and all!

TABLE TALK

1. Research consistently shows that as income increases, the percentage of giving goes down. Why is this true?
2. What is the major struggle you have when it comes to giving? (See "Why People Don't Give" page 1).
3. If someone looked at your checkbook, what would they discover about your spiritual condition?
4. Which is a bigger spiritual test for you: adversity and poverty? Or comfort and prosperity?
5. What have you learned about tithing?

II. Seven Reasons to Give (II Corinthians 8-9).

We all receive appeal letters asking us to give to some cause (political, environmental, social, educational, religious). Describe some of the tactics used in these letters to motivate you to give.

- _____ (Fear – what will happen if funds don't come in) _____.
- _____ (Guilt – you have so much, don't be selfish) _____.
- _____ (Greed – you will get a gift, recognition, a blessing) _____.
- _____ (Pride – you'll feel better about yourself) _____.

II Corinthians 8-9 is an "appeal letter." Paul is asking for money. But this appeal letter is unlike any you have ever received. Here we have a definitive and divinely inspired example of how to ask for money.

Background: Paul is collecting funds for the poor Christians in Jerusalem (the mother church) who are currently experiencing severe hardship. As the Jerusalem church had been the source of great spiritual blessings for others, now, daughter churches have the opportunity to show their gratitude by offering a gift of material blessings in return.

But many were skeptical about this offering. They had a list of reasons for not wanting to participate: Can we trust Paul? What are his real motives in asking for our money? We too are hard pressed, how then can we give to others? Will the funds be wisely used? Why can't the folks in Jerusalem take care of themselves? The church is always asking for money!

So Paul writes the most famous appeal letter of all time. Read together:

- chapter 8:1-9.
- chapter 9:6-15.

Paul outlines seven reasons why the Corinthians should give to the cause he is promoting. His primary concern is NOT the money... but rather the **motivation** for giving.

1. It is an awesome **privilege** to give.

Don't think of giving as a duty or obligation. Think of it as a blessed opportunity. You have the privilege of becoming a **partner/co-worker** with God, joining Him in what He is doing in the world!

Though poor themselves (8:2), the Christians in Macedonia didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to join in on what God was doing. They *urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints (8:4).*

We see a similar attitude in those who gave gifts for the building of the first Tabernacle. When Moses called for the offering, the people responded with joy and freely gave "more than enough." In fact, he had to physically restrain them from bringing more! (Ex. 36:6-7).

David Livingstone gave up everything to serve in Africa as a missionary. He faced disease, danger, loneliness and discouragement. But what a privilege!

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paying back a small part of the great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay! Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind and a bright hope of glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.

BOTTOM LINE: Don't miss the opportunity to be a co-worker with God! (I Cor. 3:9).

2. Giving is a way to verify whether you really understand grace.

Listen how Paul describes the offering he is taking in terms of grace.

*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**. I am not commanding you, but I want to **test** the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. (8:6-8).*

Paul is saying that this offering is a kind of "test," a way to discover the true state of our heart. There is a direct relationship between our spiritual health and our attitudes toward giving. Like a thermometer, our attitude toward giving is a very good indicator of the true temperature of our soul.

BOTTOM LINE: To discover how much I know about God's grace, I only need to look at my habits of giving.

3. Giving undermines the power of Mammon (the money-god).

Although it is not mentioned directly in this passage, the New Testament makes clear that giving is perhaps the most effective way to break the grip of the money-god on our lives. Greed, materialism, covetousness, the love of worldly things... these things are like cancer and can destroy our very souls.

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money (Mammon). (Matthew 6:24).

Think of those who made shipwreck of their faith because of money: Achan, Judas, the rich young ruler, Ananias and Saphira, etc.

BOTTOM LINE: If you feel the love of money is threatening your spiritual vitality, then here is the answer: **Give! Give! Give!**

4. Giving is perhaps the best way to **imitate** the life of Jesus.

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).

The goal of salvation is that we would be re-created in the image of Jesus, that we would become Christlike. Jesus gave away everything so that others could gain everything. His greatest joy came from seeing the needs of others met. Therefore, "your attitude should be the same" as His (Phil 2:5).

A man had a dream of hell: A large banquet hall and a table filled with mountains of delicious food. But everyone at the table had elbows that would not bend! Then he had a dream of heaven: He saw exactly the same scene except this time the room was full of joy and laughter as people were feeding one another!

⁴⁵ *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45).*

BOTTOM LINE: My likeness to Christ can be measured by my **joy** in seeing others enriched through my poverty.

5. Don't let anyone pressure you! Give because you **want to give**.

Think of how Paul could have made his appeal for funds:

Just picture those suffering, starving believers back in the mother church in Jerusalem. They've been through so much – famine, persecution, poverty. And look at you. You live in a nice house, drive a late model camel and struggle with overeating. If you would just give the money you spend at Starbucks each week you could save three children from dying. And don't forget: besides being tax deductible, your gifts will earn big dividends in heaven.

Do not be manipulated by guilt, fear, threats, greed or emotional appeals. If your motives for giving are wrong, then you will only increase your misery and will not be a blessing to others.

*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful** giver. (9:7).*

The word "cheerful" in Greek is HILAROS (from where we get the word "hilarious.") God loves a hilarious giver! Giving should be voluntary, free, generous and fun!

BOTTOM LINE: If you don't want to give... **Don't!**

6. Giving makes you a candidate for **God's blessings**.

⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously...¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.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. (9:6, 10-11).

Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to act out of what Randy Alcorn calls "**enlightened self-interest**" (*The Treasure Principle*, p. 15). Paul is saying: *Do yourself a favor. Give! It's good for you. The more you give, the more you get in return!*

Certainly, this principle can be abused and the Gospel perverted into a ticket to prosperity. But Paul is not preaching a "health and wealth" Gospel. He is simply describing what often happens when God's people give in the right way.

Jesus said it most succinctly: *It is more blessed to give than to receive. (Acts 20:35).*

Think about that final scene in Charles Dickens' *The Christmas Carol*. Ebenezer Scrooge is joyfully running up and down the street giving money away! Just for the sheer hilarity fun of it!

BOTTOM LINE: Don't give until it hurts. Rather, give until **it feels good!**

7. Giving is a tremendous **encouragement** to others.

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will

praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (9:12-13).

Many of us have no idea of the power of a well-timed, Spirit-directed gift to encourage those who are down-hearted.

Joseph sold a field and gave the money away. The believers were so encouraged that they changed his name and began to call him Barnabas (the son of encouragement).

BOTTOM LINE: When I give from right motives, God is **blessed**, the devil **trembles** and the saints are **fortified**.

TABLE TALK

1. Why is God more concerned about WHY we give (motives) than HOW MUCH we give?
2. Think about your own motives for giving. What typically motivates you to give?
3. Look back over the seven reasons to give (pages 4-9). Which reasons do you find most difficult?
4. Has this study changed your thinking about giving? How?
5. Will this study change your practice of giving? How?

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose" (Jim Elliot, missionary martyr).

"The less I spent on myself and the more I gave to others, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become" (Hudson Taylor).

"I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all. But whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess" (Martin Luther).