“First, Give Your Heart to Christ”
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November 4, 2018, Ward Parkway Presbyterian

During all of November, we will look at the Principles of Christian Giving. I don’t know about you, but for Joyce and I, we want to know how to give as Christians. We think the culture today provides mixed signals about giving. It has not been clear to us.

I believe chapters 8 & 9 written by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians provide clear and bold guidance about giving as a Christian.

I could have selected the teaching by Jesus about giving. Look at these verses from the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 6 of Matthew’s Gospel (using NIV).

Matthew 6:2
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 others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full.

Matthew 6:19-21
19 Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

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

I could have selected the words of Jesus, but I decide to allow the Apostle Paul to guide how we think about giving. Here’s my plan for preaching.

November 4
First, Give Your Heart to Christ

November 11
Second, Give According to What You Have

November 18
Third, Sow Generosity
November 25
Fourth, Give with Joy and Thanksgiving

Let’s examine our scripture passage for today, verse by verse.

2 Corinthians 8:1

1 We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia.

The subject is “the grace of God.” Paul wants to teach the Corinthians about the grace of God given to the churches of Macedonia. The three churches are the Philippians, the Thessalonians, and the Bereans. Take a look at their location.

During his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 16 & 17), Paul and his companions – Silas, Timothy, and Luke - visited Philippi first, reaching out to the women praying by the river, healing the young girl possessed by an evil spirit, and helping the prison guard know Christ in his life. Soon they were no longer welcome in Philippi, but it’s clear by his letter to the Philippians that he fell in love with them. Then they went to Thessalonica for three weeks. We don’t have an account of what happened there but an uproar caused them to leave quickly. According to Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, they went to Berea and also stayed a short time because of the crowds. We discover that the Bereans were more receptive than others because they welcomed the message, and then went home to check it out.

The Thessalonians received Paul’s first letter; the Philippians received one of Paul’s last letters; but the Bereans are never mentioned again. All of them were very generous, and Paul wants the Corinthians to learn from them.

While we were in California during the 1980s, the church had John Wilson, a missionary from Uganda visit us. Our children got to know John, a tall black man who had great joy, smiled all
of the time, and truly loved people. Three months after his visit, Dr. Nelson, the senior pastor,
told us that John had been killed by rebels in the area. It really affected our three children. The
whole church was asked to donate money to help pay for the education of John’s five children.
Our children collected change from us and brought it to church. One of our good friends had
borrowed $10,000 for a cruise, but they cancelled the vacation and gave the entire $10,000 to
the education fund. Wow! That decision opened our eyes to example of others and how they
give.

2 Corinthians 8:2

2 For during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have
overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

This is a bold statement about their generosity. They were going through tough times –
pressure from the Romans, conflict with the religious authorities, and the strain of being a new
church – yet they had joy and were generous.

Several years ago, I was visiting a lady in the hospital. She was very active in church, especially
her prayer group. Her face was twice the normal size because of the medication. She could
barely speak. I had heard from her daughter that she was critical. When I entered her room,
she had her eyes closed and so I called out her name softly, “Beverly.” She opened her eyes
right away and said, “Oh, Rev. Bob. I was just praying for my friends in our prayer group. One
person has a son who has problems with drugs. And tell me about the program on Saturday to
plan lunches for the Japanese students who will be visiting soon.” I was shocked. Beverly was
in terrible shape, yet she has such joy and concern for others. Such a generous lady!

Paul wanted the Corinthians to learn from the generosity of the Macedonians.

2 Corinthians 8:3-4

3 For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their
means, 4 begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.

The Macedonians gave two different ways: 1). According to their means (a principle that we
will focus on next Sunday); 2). Beyond their means (even begging Paul to do so)!

The idea of giving according to your means is a fairness principle. A person who earns $20,000
per year should not be compared to a person who makes $200,000 per year. It’s not fair.

The idea of giving beyond your means is an entirely different subject. John Dierolf was an elder
at the California church, and a very wealthy man. As the chair of the Stewardship Committee,
he told us about his giving. “Over the years, I have increased the percentage of my giving from
10%, the tithe that my parents taught me, to 20% because my business was going so well, to 30% several years ago, and now to 50%. I am afraid of cutting my giving because things are going so well.” John certainly had the gift of giving. Paul wrote about that gift in Romans 12:6-8.

Romans 12:6-8
6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; 7 if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; 8 if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

No one has all of these gifts. Some have the gift of extreme generosity, and God blesses them in that gift.

2 Corinthians 8:5
5 And this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.

Here’s the key scripture verse for today. The Macedonians gave themselves first to Christ before they gave of their finances.

I don’t think you can understand how to give as a Christian unless you first give your heart to Christ. A heart decision has to be made before the head can make a decision about finances.

Let’s look at the last two verses, and then think about the central theme today.

2 Corinthians 8:6-7
6 So that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. 7 Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

Titus became a worker with Paul later on and was quite useful for special assignments. Titus was in Corinth when Paul wrote his letter.

Paul concludes this section with the urging to excel. The people in Corinth were very talented people. The passage we heard from 1 Corinthians 13 identifies how they excelled in speech and knowledge and faith and boldness. Now Paul wants them to excel in generosity, but to first give their heart to Christ.
We swim ½ mile on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays early in the morning, and have done so for 25 years. Often I see a retired Nazarene pastor, John, in the pool who also served on the staff at Mid-America Nazarene University. John asked me on Monday morning, “How are you doing at Ward Parkway?”

“Good,” I answered. “Next Sunday, I begin a stewardship series about giving.”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” John replied. “I never talked about money from the pulpit.” He served as a pastor of a small church one hour east of here for 35 years. “I only preach about faithfulness. After all, if the Lord has your heart, then the Lord also has your pocket book.” I told him I was going to quote him today, and he just grinned.

Several Sundays ago, I read a small section from Bob Munger’s famous sermon, “My Heart, Christ’s Home.” Bob wrote the sermon as a first person account of Christ visiting all of the rooms in his heart: the kitchen, the library, the living room, and so on. Bob is Presbyterian and his sermon is the most published sermon in the world except for Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Here’s the last story in the sermon when Christ asks about the hall closet upstairs.

*There is just one more matter that I might share with you. One day I found Christ waiting for me at the door. An arresting look was in His eye. As I entered, He said to me, "There is an unusual odor in the house. There is something dead around here. It's upstairs. I think it is in the hall closet." As soon as He said this, I knew what He was talking about. Yes, there was a small closet up there on the landing, just a few feet square, and in that closet, behind lock and key, I had one or two little personal things that I did not want anyone to know about and certainly I did not want Christ to see them. I knew they were dead and rotting things left over from the old life. And yet I loved them, and I wanted them for myself. I was afraid to admit they were there.

Reluctantly, I went up with Him, and as we mounted the stairs the odor became stronger and stronger. He pointed at the door. "It's in there! Some dead thing!"

I was angry. That's the only way I can put it. I had given Him access to the library, the dining room, the living room, the workroom, the playroom, and now He was asking me about a little two-by-four closet. I said to myself, "This is too much. I am not going to give Him the key."

"Well," He said, reading my thoughts, "If you think I'm going to stay up here on the second floor with this odor, you are mistaken. I will take my bed out on the back porch. I'm certainly not going to put up with that." Then I saw Him start down the stairs.
When you have come to know and love Christ, the worst thing that can happen is to sense His fellowship retreating from you. I had to surrender. "I'll give you the key," I said sadly, "but you'll have to open the closet and clean it out. I haven't the strength to do it."

"I know," He said. "I know you haven't. Just give me the key. Just authorize me to take care of that closet and I will." So with trembling fingers I passed the key to Him. He took it from my hand, walked over to the door, opened it, entered it, took out all the dead stuff that was rotting there, and threw it away. Then He cleaned the closet and painted it, fixed it up, doing it all in a moment's time. Oh, what victory and release to have that dead thing out of my life!

Then a thought came to me. I said to myself, "I have been trying to keep this heart of mine clear for Christ. I start on one room and no sooner have I cleaned that then another room is dirty. I begin on the second room and the first room becomes dusty again. I am so tired and weary trying to maintain a clean heart and an obedient life. I am just not up to it!"

So I ventured a question: "Lord, is there any chance that you would take over the responsibility of the whole house and operate it for me and with me just as you did that closet? Would you take the responsibility to keep my heart what it ought to be and my life where it ought to be?"

I could see His face light up as He replied, "Certainly, that is what I came to do. You cannot be a victorious Christian in your own strength. That is impossible. Let me do it through you and for you. That is the way. But," He added slowly, "I am not owner of this house. I am just a guest. I have no authority to proceed, since the property is not mine."

I saw it in a minute and dropping to my knees, I said, "Lord, You have been a guest and I have been the host. From now on I am going to be the servant. You are going to be the owner and Master and Lord."

Running as fast as I could to the strongbox, I took out the title deed to the house describing its assets and liabilities, location and situation and condition. I eagerly signed it over to belong to Christ alone for time and eternity. "Here," I said. "Here it is, all that I am and have forever. Now you run the house. I'll just remain with you as a servant and friend."

Let us pray.