“Second, Give According to What You Have”
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2 Corinthians 8:8-15

Last Sunday, I began my November sermon series about the Principles of Christian Giving. The sermon was called “First, Give Your Heart to Christ,” and that title sums up the entire message. In case you missed it, an audio is on the website along with a printed copy.

I have a simple message today: “Second, Give According to What You Have.” It’s the fairness principle. It’s easy to apply, but it takes strength and courage to do so. As we move through our scripture passage today, I have three things to say. Here’s the first one.

Compare, but be careful!

It’s based on verses 8-9.

2 Corinthians 8:8-9

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 sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

It’s interesting that Paul begins by saying: “I am not commanding you.” Through the history of interpretation and the development of the canon, the very words of Paul have become scripture, God’s Holy Word. Yet, at times, Paul is cautious about his advice. Sometimes in his two letters to the Corinthians, he adds a comment whether he is stating about his view and God’s command.

So, I think the rest of verse 8 needs some further discussion. Paul is suggesting that Corinthians should test the value of their love by comparing it to the value of love from others.

Compare, but be careful! As humans, we can compare up and we can compare down. Both can cause problems.

When we compare up, we compare ourselves to those who we perceive are better than us. This could mean better speaker or better looking or better home or better financial accounts or better mind, and so on. It’s an unfair comparison and unhealthy for us to do. You can always find someone who is better than you in every matter on earth. Even the best football
team only remains so for one game and the best place to live stays the same until the next disaster and the best looking person only continues until age takes hold.

Your self-esteem has a better hold on reality when you learn to accept yourself and not compare yourself to others.

When we compare down, we judge and demean others. Jesus has plenty to say about viewing others with distain or disrespect. He saw Zaccheaus in a tree and wanted to spend time at his home, saying so publicly. He spent time with sinners and those in low positions. He told a story that gave the best honor to a Samaritan! He told another story that had a father run to welcome his wayward son home and hug him. (During that time, men showed disrespect by running and also by sharing affection.) For his friends and companions, Jesus welcomed some who fished for a living, one who collected taxes, some zealots, and others who had no standing with the religious leaders of their day.

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But then, Paul provides an example for our comparing. He speaks about Jesus Christ, actually the grace of Christ who gave up being rich (he left heaven) and became poor (he came to earth), so that through his sacrifice we might become rich (heaven). That’s the comparison we need to hear about! Let’s take on the mind of Christ! Let’s look to Christ when we want to know how to behave.

When we were first married, we had a brief conversation with Joyce’s parents about giving. Her father said, “You can’t out give the Lord.” Our gifts are based on the greatest gift of all: God’s love shown in the gift of Christ on the cross.

Compare, but be careful!

My next point is in the form of a question.

What is acceptable?

Let’s base our answer on the next three verses.

2 Corinthians 8:10-12

10 And here is my judgment 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. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

This is Paul’s discernment (judgment) about how to give. He thinks that what he will say is best for the Corinthians and by the doctrine of inspiration, the best for us today.

Paul wants them to give according to your means. The gift you have is acceptable according to what you have and not according to what you don’t have.

Look at how Jesus compares the poor widow to the rich.

Luke 21:1-4

1 As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. 2 He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. 3 “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. 4 All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

The acceptable giving has to do with what you have or don’t have. As I said earlier, this is the fairness principle.

Now, I realize that the word “fairness” is used by many to describe their particular position in politics and social behavior. Fairness greatly depends on who you are and upon your perspective in life.

Our daughter who lives in town, Rachel, used to say, “That isn’t fair,” when she disagreed with a decision we made. As a teenager and young adult, her idea of fairness was different than our idea of fairness. It might be the clothes she selected or the time she had to return home or the amount of time she needed to spend on homework or the need to get a part time job to earn money for a trip to California with girlfriends or the amount of money we would give her for survival in Olathe when she dropped out of college.

The poor widow didn’t have much to give, but still did so. The rich people had plenty. Jesus saw the generosity by the woman, and honored her.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to think about giving or intention to give. He wanted them to complete the thought and intention, and just give according to their means.

Let me illustrate what I think is meant by giving according to your means.
Please look at the Golden Gate Bridge with me. It has two large towers. The bridge is 1.7 miles long, 90 feet wide and 746 feet tall. It has two main cables that each have 28,000 strands of wire. 800,000 miles of wire are used in the bridge.

The painters work all of the time, using about 10,000 gallons of paint per year. The name of the paint is international orange. As construction neared completion, there was debate between the construction firm and the US Navy about the color of the bridge. During the debate, the workers put on the first coat of primer and everyone said, “That’s it.” It’s not golden, but primer orange instead. 2,300 lawsuits were filed in court against the construction. 110,000 vehicles cross the bridge each day and the toll of $8 per car is only taken southbound.

It opened on April 19, 1937, and has closed only for bad weather (1951, 1982 & 1983) with winds between 69 to 73 mph and a few celebrations. On May 24, 1987, there was the 50th Anniversary Pedestrian Walk. The bridge flattened 7 feet with the number of people. The planners predicted 50,000 people would walk, but 300,000 were on the bridge when they closed it down for safety. The walkers from the north met the walkers from the south, and there was panic. About 500,000 more walkers were turned away. Later, engineers said there was no danger to the bridge since it was made to allow the movement of 16 feet up and down, and 27 feet from side to side.

Two years ago, I used the Golden Gate Bridge as an illustration in a Sunday School lecture and one couple said they were on the bridge for that 50th Anniversary Walk. “It was fun and frightening at the same time.”

Look at the bridge for a moment as I use it as an illustration for giving according to your means. What is the most important part of the bridge? Some would say the two towers. They are certainly important. Others say the cables. Again, they too are crucial. Still others would say the paint because if it was not painted the steel would rust and fall apart. Further, some
think the concrete foundations below the two towers are the absolute most important. It’s true – without a good foundation, everything falls apart.

I have a minority view. I think the most important parts of the bridge are the 1.2 million steel rivets that hold everything together. It’s the rivets. They hold the bridge together.

What is it that holds all things together? What is it that gives this principle of Christian giving meaning and depth? What is it that binds the call of obedience and the joy of giving all together?

Here’s my answer: It’s on the front cover of the bulletin. It’s love. Love holds all things together. Love is the reason Christ came to earth. Love is the reason why Christ died on the cross for us.

Love is the reason why a Christian would want to give according to their means.

Here’s my last thought about today’s passage:

Work for equality of giving and receiving!

2 Corinthians 8:13-15

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. The goal is equality, 15 as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

Notice the use of the word “equality.” Paul uses the word twice because he wants the Corinthians to understand that at times we give, and at other times, we receive.

At the time when Paul wrote this letter, the people in Corinth were doing quite well. It was a port town, and there was plenty of money. The Jerusalem church, on the other hand, was struggling. Paul wants them to give now, and possibly in the future, receive from the Jerusalem church. “The goal is equality,” he writes, and then quotes Exodus 16:17-18.

Exodus 16:17-18

17 The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. 18 And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.
You never can tell or know the future. The one you help might be the one who helps you.

Every Sunday morning, I call James Byers, a pastor in Wellington, Kansas. We share and then pray for each other. You have been prayed about several times. I first met James when he became the youth director in Pittsburg Kansas. I think I’ve told you a few things about him before. A few months ago, he told me about Drew Reding and his ordination service. Before I tell you this story, you need to see a picture of Drew and his family.

Drew is one of the best youth directors I’ve ever met. He’s crazy and fun and relevant and personal and wild and full of love for kids and full of love for Jesus Christ.

Recently, Drew was doing a funeral in Clay Center, Kansas, and told James that he still uses the same format for a funeral that James taught him. James told me that he uses the same funeral format that I taught him. I was taught about how to do a funeral from Dr. Nelson, my mentor in California. And he learned from Dr. Kemper, his mentor back in the 1950s.

Recently, James and I were talking about death and funerals. I asked him if he would do my funeral when I die. He said, “Yes, and I will use the funeral format that I learned from you and that I have taught Drew Reding.”

Here’s a picture of Drew and James last summer.
Giving and receiving! It’s a principle of giving.

Twenty-two years ago, when James arrived in Pittsburg, Kansas, as the senior pastor, I became his mentor. He belonged to an independent church at the time, but wanted to become Presbyterian. He was attending a Bible college and wanted to eventually enter seminary. We had some difficult discussions. At times, he got angry with me, especially when I had to tell him that the Bible College was not an accredited institution.

He transferred to Pittsburg State University, and five years later, went to Dubuque Seminary. We continued to call each other every Sunday morning. Upon graduation and ordination, he served churches in Texas, Kansas, North Carolina, and now in Wellington, Kansas.

Somewhere along the line, we switched places. I stopped being his mentor and now he is my mentor. I don’t know how it happened, but it did.

I gave to him for years, and now he is giving to me.

Next Sunday, the focus for our thinking will be 2 Corinthians 9:6. Look at it for a minute.

2 Corinthians 9:6

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

I don’t like to put it so bluntly, but some have summarized this verse: You get what you give.
What you sow is what you reap!

Think about it and I’ll see you next Sunday as we continue the principles for Christian giving.

Let us pray.