

The Necessity of Giving

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 29th of August 2004. The preacher is Carol Olforsen.

Her sermon is entitled The Necessity of Giving and is based on 2 Corinthians 8.16-9.15.

Let us pray. Loving God, as we come to look at your word, open our eyes and ears and direct our hearts towards you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Please be seated. Well, good morning. When I came to look at this passage, when the preaching roster came out and I looked at the passage that I was going to be preaching on and looked at the title and hadn't actually read what the passage was, I sort of had that sinking feeling in my heart and it sort of reminded me a little bit of when we were children, my sisters and brother and myself, and we'd all squabble and want to have our way or do something in particular.

And so my father would always solve that problem by getting straws. He'd say, OK, let's draw straws. And the times when I'd sort of put my hand in thinking, I'm pulling out the longest one, it would be the shortest one.

[1 : 25] So I sort of came to that passage today or earlier in the week with that sort of sense of feeling that I've drawn the short straw because as Tim said last week, and it's continuing from last week's passage, that speaking about money and about giving is a bit of an uncomfortable, uncomfortable thing.

It's something that we often are a bit embarrassed about and prefer not to have to talk about. But it's in the passage and we've been preaching through to Corinthians and so this is where we're up to.

But also may I say that during the week, as I have been working on this passage, reading about it and praying about it, it's actually been one, instead of drawing a short straw, I've felt that I drew the long straw because it's been one of great encouragement to me.

But in preaching it to you today, I also have to say that I've had to preach it to myself thoroughly this week. And in doing so, I've actually had to also look at my thoughts and my actions about giving and generosity and had to make some corrections to that too.

So this morning's reading follows on from last week, as I said, and if you wanted to follow it along, it's on page 941 and we're starting at verse 16, going from there on chapter 8.

[2 : 41] You may recall that Tim spoke last week about the need to give not out of compulsion or guilt, but out of a prayerful response to God.

The church at Macedonia was one that was suffering from affliction and poverty and yet it had given joyously and generously to the needs, to the collection that the apostle Paul was taking for the church in Jerusalem that was in fairly dire straits.

We're not 100% sure, but probably they were suffering from persecution and some economic sanctions because of their faith. And so they were in great need.

And Paul was making a collection from all of the churches around that he would visit. And he was continuing to do that. And so it was of such importance to Paul that he actually devotes two whole chapters.

He devotes chapter 8 and chapter 9 in this second length of the Corinthians to it. This morning's passage begins with Paul's thanksgiving to God that Titus shares the same eagerness for the Corinthians that Paul himself does.

[3 : 48] He sees this as a sign of God's own gracious concern for the Corinthians and their well-being. Whilst Titus will be coming to collect the money from them, Paul assures them it's not so much the money, but it's Titus' love and zeal for them that has impelled him to make that journey.

As far as the finances are concerned, Paul is scrupulous in the way to make sure that not only is he doing the right thing, but that he's being seen to be doing the right thing in collecting of the money.

And he's doing this in order to guard against any false accusations or insinuations. John Calvin wisely warned that there's nothing more apt to lay one open to sinister imputations than the handling of public money.

It's very important that care and great scrupulousness is handled that way. In fact, Paul doesn't even handle the money himself, but he sends Titus, someone who's well-known and loved by the Corinthians, and two other brothers who have been appointed and who, as messengers of the church, he sent them on ahead to collect the money.

The care Paul takes is not so much to protect his own reputation, but he realises the reputation of Christ and the church are at stake. And it's the same care that Paul took when he was staying with Corinthians earlier in the first letter of Corinthians.

[5 : 16] He didn't seek from them any financial help or support, but instead made tents and earned his own way as he was staying there.

And he did this to make sure that he wouldn't cause any hindrance of the gospel. And this attitude, I think, is one that all Christians can certainly learn from and take note of, and particularly Christian leaders.

Well, back in verse 10 of chapter 8, we're told that the Corinthians had shown their enthusiasm by initiating this collection in the previous year, and they had, in fact, spurred on the Macedonian church to giving.

But unlike the Macedonian church that had not only been spurred on, they had made their collection, the Corinthian church had begun and had not yet completed it. And, of course, it's easy to have good intentions and to be enthusiastic about a beginning, but somehow these good intentions can often be put on a back burner.

A few weeks ago, a group of us went out to the annual quilt exhibition, and they're seeing row after row after row of magnificently completed quilts, beautifully quilted, beautifully made.

[6 : 28] I think it spurred many, many women who were at that exhibition. And to go home and to grab those ones out of the cupboard, the ones that have been started and not quite finished, or all those collections of materials and wadding and everything else to sort of get those quilts made, to get them completed.

I've only actually ever made one quilt, and I did finish it, and I gave it to our eldest daughter, Catherine. But then in a rash and enthusiastic moment, many years ago, I said to our other daughter, Amanda, that one day I'd make her a quilt.

So the quilt exhibition spurred me to at least make a phone call to the local patchwork shop and find out when they do the next courses. I still haven't committed to actually making one yet again.

Hopefully I will, and that spurred me on to making at least that step. Paul knew the Corinthians well, and he'd lived with them for 18 months, and their willingness to respond to the needs of others was something that he in fact boasted about.

It's not so much, therefore, I don't think that he thinks they won't finish this collection, but he's wondering if it will be finished on time. I think it's a bit like the concern many people had over Athens at the time leading up to the Olympic Games.

[7 : 47] You may recall in the months leading up there before the Games started, the people would say, well, this is a bit like the Greek way. You know, they undertake to do something, and it may seem to take a long time to get off the ground, and there may be some concern about when it's finished, but in the end, they come through, it gets finished, and I think we've seen that with the Olympics.

We've seen wonderful two weeks of the Games, and maybe, maybe the last road was being finished off, and the last few things were being touched up in the stadium, but on that opening ceremony, it was there, it was ready, and the Games began.

But Paul's a bit like the Olympic officials six months ago. Whilst knowing there was no lack of willingness to do the job, he thinks it's best to send a delegation ahead so he can be sure that the Corinthians will not be embarrassed when they arrive that the collection hasn't been completed, and also it's to ensure that there won't be any embarrassment on Paul's behalf when he comes so that there's no ill feelings will occur, because they'd promised a bountiful gift and to give generously, and Paul wants them to now fulfil that promise, giving that will be a blessing to others and not one that has to be hurriedly produced and therefore a bit grudgingly done.

He wants it to be a blessing to them as much as to others. This sermon is titled The Necessity of Giving, so I think it will be helpful as we look at this passage in the light of the whole of Scripture to explore the question of why is it necessary as Christians to give, and why is it necessary to give generously?

Well, skipping over the page to chapter 9, verses 6 to 9, Paul gives the theological understanding for giving. In verse 6, Paul says that to give is to sow.

[9 : 37] Like seed that grows into a harvest, giving generously brings life. And he quotes probably a well-known popular proverb, a saying that was popular at the time.

He says, the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. The one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. And the image is one of a farmer scattering seed.

He dips his hand into the sack, scoops out a handful of grain, and throws it open-handedly out onto the field, over and over. The link between sowing and reaping isn't a new concept in the Bible.

In our own book of Proverbs, the collection of writings that express observations and truths about human behavior found in the Old Testament reflect similar ideas. In Proverbs 11, the writer says, Some give richly, yet grow all the richer.

Others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. And Proverbs 19 says, Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full.

[10 : 46] In his teaching to the disciples, Jesus said, Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.

For the measure you give will be the measure you get back. In verse 7 of chapter 9, Paul reminds his readers to give what they've already determined to give.

He doesn't want them to give reluctantly or out of a feeling of compulsion, but to give cheerfully. When God directed Moses to collect an offering for the tabernacle back in Exodus, he told them to take for me an offering for all those whose hearts prompt them to give.

And this prompting, this heart prompting by God, is also the motivation for giving seen in David's prayer when there was an offering being collected for the temple. He prays, But who am I and what is my people that we should be able to make this free will offering?

For all things come from you and of your own have we given. He goes on to pray, I know, I know, my God, that you search the heart and take pleasure in uprightness.

[12 : 00] In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things. And now I have seen your people who are here present offering freely and joyously to you.

Keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people and direct their hearts towards you. Giving is necessary because it reflects God's care for his people.

The collection Paul was making for the Christians in the wider church was in response to their need. And in his exhortation to the Israelites back in Deuteronomy, Moses tells his people to remember anyone in need within their community and not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted.

Give liberally, he says, and be ungrudging when you do so. For on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work. Since there will never cease to be some in need on earth, I therefore command you, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbour in your land.

Giving is necessary because it enables us to cooperate with the work of God. In verse 8, Paul assures the Corinthians that they can give with confidence because God will provide for them.

[13 : 26] Not only for their needs, but he says that he will supply them with every blessing in abundance so that always, having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

You may recall, many of you may have seen the film Schindler's List and it depicts the Oscar Schindler, a wealthy industrialist in Germany in the Second World War.

And when Schindler learnt of the death camps, he discovered that he could actually purchase dues to come and work in his munitions factory. and so he was able to save many, many Jews from the death camps by purchasing them to get them to come and work in his factory.

And this had a twofold effect. Well, not only did he save the Jews, but they also worked then in his factory and they, um, they used to, uh, uh, do it, do it such, the munitions would be faulty so that they actually, um, sabotaged the work that they were doing so that not only would they, when they were sending out the, the, uh, ammunition, it wouldn't work so well either.

So in that way, there was sort of, he was, he was being very clever in, in overcoming, uh, earning their contribution against the war. When the Germans surrendered at the end of the war, Schindler, who'd been an extremely wealthy person, was by now almost bankrupt.

[14 : 57] He'd spent his wealth to save over a thousand Jews from the gas chambers. Giving enables us to share abundantly in every good work.

Throughout the world, people are desperate to hear God's word. We in Australia have great opportunities to gain access to Bibles and other Christian literature for our own spiritual growth and edification.

However, countries such as China and Egypt Indonesia, Vietnam are just a few of the many that do not have this privilege. In Africa and many other nations, there's a great shortage of adequately trained Bible teachers, church leaders and planters and other Christian medical and aid workers.

Here in Doncaster, giving enables ministry to be done both locally and in the wider church. By giving, we're able to share in the spreading of the good news about God and of his son, Jesus Christ, both near and far.

Sometimes I've wondered, though, just how do you define Christian generosity? How is it measured? Well, Jesus gives a good illustration when he's sitting in the temple with his disciples and watching people as they come in and place their offerings in the temple.

[16 : 17] And Jesus watched and as they went in, many people with great wealth came in and put large amounts and then a widow came in with two small coins about worth a penny and she dropped that in.

And you may remember, Jesus pointed her out and said, that woman has given more than all the others because she gave all that she had, all that she had to live on. She gave everything.

The others gave out of their surplus. They gave what was left over. In a sense, they may not even have missed what they gave in a week's time. So Jesus points that out to his disciples and he challenges them to give sacrificially, to give till it hurts.

As Oskar Schindler was saying goodbye to his Jewish financial manager at the end of the war, he embraced him and sobbed, saying, I could have done more.

He looked at his car and said, why did I save this? I could have bought ten Jews for this. He held up something small in his hand and said, I could have bought another person for this.

[17 : 31] Why didn't I do more? Giving is necessary because it expresses commitment trust in our Lord God as sovereign and creator.

As the psalmist says, the earth belongs to the Lord and everything in it. In verse 10, Paul says, he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

And I want you to note that he says here that the seed will be increased so that you can sow more seed and that the harvest is a harvest of righteousness.

Our motivation for giving is not based on rewards of financial gain in this present world, such as those who preach a prosperity gospel often claim.

But we're giving because we're trusting that God will meet all of our needs and will bring us into a closer reliance on him. The greatest reward we can receive is a growth in faith and godliness, bringing praise and glory to God.

[18 : 48] The great 19th century missionary Hudson Taylor learned an important lesson about trusting God before he left England to spend many years of fruitful missionary work in China.

And I just want to read a little bit from his book about this lesson that he learnt when he's still in England. He writes, After concluding my last service about 10 o'clock that night, a poor man asked me to go and pray with his wife, saying that she was dying.

I readily agreed and on the way to his house asked him why he'd not sent for a priest, as his accent told me he was an Irishman. He had done so, he said, but the priest refused to come without a payment of 18 pence, which the man did not possess, as the family was starving.

Immediately it occurred to my mind that all the money I had in the world was a solitary half-crown in my pocket, and that it was one coin. Moreover, that while the basin of water gruel I usually took for supper was waiting for me, and there was sufficient for breakfast in the morning, I certainly had nothing for dinner the coming day.

Somehow or other there was once a stoppage of flow of joy in my heart, but instead of reproving myself I began to reprove the poor man telling him it was very wrong to have allowed matters to get into such a state as he described, and that he ought to have applied to the relieving officer.

[20 : 22] The man answered that he had done so and was told to come back at 11 o'clock the next morning, but he feared his wife might not live through the night. Ah, thought I, if only I had two shillings and a sixpence instead of this half crown, how gladly would I give these poor people a shilling?

But to part with the half crown was far from my thoughts. I little dreamt that the truth of the matter simply was that I could trust God for one and sixpence, but was not prepared to trust him fully without any money in my pocket.

Still, I followed on up a miserable flight of stairs into a wretched room and oh, what a sight there presented itself. Four or five children stood about, their sunken cheeks and temples were all telling unmistakably the story of slow starvation, and lying on a wretched pallet was a poor, exhausted mother with a tiny infant thirty-six hours old, moaning rather than crying at her side, for it too seemed spent and failing.

Ah, thought I, if I had two shillings and a sixpence instead of a half a crown, how gladly should they have one and sixpence of it? But still, a wretched unbelief prevented me from obeying the impulse to relieve their distress at the cost of all I possessed.

Then he goes on to say that he began to pray with them, but during praying with them such a time of conflict came upon me as I have never experienced before or since. How I got through that prayer I do not know, and whether the words uttered were connected or disconnected I cannot tell, but I rose from my knees in great distress of mind.

[22 : 13] The poor father turned to me and said, You see what a terrible state we are in, sir, if you can help us, for God's sake, do. At that moment the word flashed into my mind, Give to him that asks of thee from Matthew 5 and in the word of a king there is power.

I put my hand into my pocket and slowly drawing out the half crown gave it to the man telling him that it might seem a small matter for me to relieve them seeing that I was comparatively well off but in parting with that coin I was giving away all I had.

He goes on to say that I remember how that night I went home to my lodgings my heart was light as it was my pocket the dark deserted streets resounded with a hymn of praise that I could not restrain when I took my basin of gruel before retiring I would not have exchanged it for a prince's feast I reminded the Lord as I knelt at my bedside that night he that giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord the next morning there was a knock on his door and he received a letter he says I looked at the letter but could not make out the handwriting it was either a strange hand or a feigned one and the postmark was blurred where it came from I could not tell on opening the envelope I found nothing written within but inside a sheet of blank paper was folded a pair of kid gloves from which as I opened them in astonishment half a sovereign fell to the ground praise the Lord I exclaimed 400% for 12 hours investment that is good interest how glad the merchants of Hull would be if they could lend their money at such a rate there and then

I determined that a bank that could not break would have my savings or earnings as the case might be a determination I have not yet learnt to regret I cannot tell you how my mind has recurred to this incident or all the help it has been to me in circumstances of difficulty in time to come if we are faithful to God in little things we shall gain experience and strength that will be helpful to us in the more serious trials of life I think that's a great example and illustration of trusting God in all things and I think if anyone here has not personally experienced God's gracious provision in response to faithfully giving let me just remind you of God's challenge to his people in Malachi he says bring the full tithe into the storehouses so that there may be food in my house and thus put me to the test says the

Lord of hosts see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing giving comes from God and brings glory to God by giving the Corinthians will glorify God by affirming with their actions the gospel of Christ as we see in verse 13 this causes others to join in glorifying God and will create a unity of prayer and appreciation between the Corinthians who were the Gentiles and the church in Jerusalem who were Jews and all of this is only possible because of God's grace in the indescribable gift he has given to all believers his one and only son who died so that all who believe in him will have the greatest gift of all peace with God and the blessing of eternal life so to draw together the threads we've seen the reason for giving is because it reflects God's love and generous care for his people it enables us to cooperate with God in doing good works which benefit us by growing us in faithfulness and righteousness and finally giving brings thanksgiving to God and this in turn helps to spread the greatest gift of all the message of salvation to all who believe

[26 : 26] Paul encouraged the Corinthians to complete what they had set out to do he didn't want them to be caught short surely none of us when Jesus returns on that final and glorious day wants to be caught short when all of creation will be swept away and all things will be made new again we don't want to look around and ask why didn't I give more amen