

## ***If Jesus Is Our Model for Giving***

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

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February 7, 2010

When Paul tries to get the believers in Corinth to support the large collection he was gathering from the Gentile Christians to give to the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, he points to two examples of giving.

First, he says, I want you to know about the grace—or that word could be rendered “generosity”—of the churches in Macedonia. Even though their economy is terrible and they are really hurting, they begged me for the privilege of taking part in this offering for their brothers and sisters in Judea. At first I thought I shouldn’t let them. They can’t really afford to give. But they persuaded me that they needed to do this for the sake of their own joy. So they have given a large gift, far beyond their means.

Paul reminds me of that rooster that often wakes us up in the parsonage. You probably know the one that hangs out in the general vicinity of Abrams Farm. I hear Justin denies owning that rooster, but no doubt he takes advantage of his services. In fact, I hear the rooster is in charge of egg production on the farm. It being winter and all, the hens are not living up to their potential. That rooster came across an egg from one of Justin’s emus—bigger than a goose egg, about this size. The rooster pushed that emu egg with his beak across the yard until he rolled it right to where the hens were gathered, then he called a meeting of the hens. “Ladies,” he said, “I don’t want to embarrass anyone, but I just want to show you what the others are doing.”

I just want to show you, Paul says, what the poor are doing. The fact is that poverty doesn’t keep people from giving. When Jesus said “blessed are the poor” he didn’t mean that the poor get a pat on the head from God. He meant that the poor are happy, that they are joyful. Paul reports in the next part of this letter that Jesus said “It is more blessed to give than to receive”—that is, the one who gives is happier than the one who receives, which we all know from experience is true. The poor don’t give out of a sense of duty; instead, as Paul says, their “abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflow in generosity.”

When we think of generosity maybe our examples shouldn’t be the Bill and Melinda Gateses of the world; that just makes us feel small. Our examples should be the poor and what they do out of their poverty. The poor in this country give a higher percentage of their income to churches and charities than the middle class or the wealthy. The most generous people in America turn out to be those who earn about \$10,000 a year. Could it be that “blessed are the poor” means that they know something we don’t?

My mother used to tell a story about an old Japanese lady who wanted to give a gift to Jesus at Christmas. She had no job skills and no money, but she wanted to do something. She went to the local market and asked the man running the produce stand if there was anything she could do to earn a little

money. He told her that if she'd take old newspapers and cut them, fold them, and stitch them in a certain way, he'd buy them for less than a penny to bag fruit in. The old lady had arthritis so bad that she could only work very slowly, but she kept at it for weeks, making bag after bag. When Christmas came, she arrived at church clutching her offering. She turned it in, beaming. "Guess what I did? I earned 58 cents to give to Jesus!" There was no disappointment in her voice, only joy. She was eager to give. I want you to know what the poor are doing.

But the model Paul ultimately comes to is the model of Jesus. As we gather at this table we remind ourselves of what Jesus gave for us—his body and his blood, his very life. When we think of what we should give as Christians, the standard we look to is not what other people do; it's not what people think is their fair share of the operating expenses; it's not what we give to all the other nonprofits they support. The standard is not even the tithe commanded in the Old Testament. The standard we look to is Jesus.

Paul said, "I'm not commanding you." Giving is not about rules. Nowhere in the New Testament does anyone say "Tithing is the rule. Just do that." Paul says, I'm not giving you a *rule* to follow, because you already have a *person* to follow. You already know the grace of Jesus Christ. You have already committed yourselves to him as Lord, saying you wanted to follow him and become like him. You don't need to be limited by a rule, because you have the example of Jesus who was rich and became poor for us. You follow someone who gave not ten percent but one hundred percent.

What does it mean to say that Jesus was rich? That he made a fortune in the carpentry business and gave it up to become a rabbi? Hardly. Paul is talking about the same kind of wealth as he was in Philippians 2, with more attention to position than possessions. Jesus was equal with God. He had everything that his Father has. But he did not consider that status something to hold onto. He let go of it and, Paul says, "he emptied himself" of all that power and of all that he had and humbled himself to be born a human being. And when he came down to our level, he did not stop, but he humbled himself further still, taking the form of a slave, serving us, and then humbled himself further yet, by accepting the shame of death on a Roman cross. An old song says

Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe,  
Only His great eternal love made my Savior go.

Jesus was rich and yet for our sakes he became poor. Why? So that by his poverty he could make us spiritually rich. The early church father Athanasius put it, "He became what we are that we might become what he is." He took on our image so that we could have the image of God restored in us. Everything that we have in Christ—peace, joy, love, fellowship, eternal life—we got it all because Jesus gave up everything for us.

Have you ever wished you could be one of those families on *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*? Imagine you are one of those kids in a family the TV show decides to help. Maybe you are disabled. Maybe you lost your home in a disaster. Maybe your house is just way too small but you have no hope of ever

having your own room. Then a crew with cameras comes to give you a house, no strings attached, and builds it in a week. At first you walk around your new home with your mouth open, asking, “Is this *ours*?” When it begins to soak in, you pump your fists in the air and shout, “We’re rich!”

Now imagine that at the end of the show, Ty Pennington reveals to you that your beautiful new home was not paid for by Sears or Home Depot or ABC. He points to a man standing beside a tree behind the crowd of neighbors, far from the cameras. “You see that man?” he asks. “That man paid for your new home. He had a beautiful home of his own and he heard about your situation, so he sold his home and gave all the money for yours. Now he is homeless, and he lives in a shelter downtown, but he wanted to do that for you. Once he was rich, but he gave it all up so that *you* could be rich.”

That story pales in comparison to what Jesus has done for us. And that is the model for our own giving: not giving what we can spare, but choosing to give up our lifestyles so that other people can have life. What matters in the end is not comparing ourselves with what other people are giving. What matters is comparing ourselves with Jesus.

Anybody who grew up Southern Baptist knows the story of Lottie Moon. She was a refined Virginia lady being courted by a seminary professor, but she gave up her comfortable life to live among the Chinese in the late 1800’s, in a time of great poverty in China. As a single woman, she preached the gospel to the Chinese. She led a crusade to stop binding the feet of girls, a practice intended to keep them in submission. She trained cadres of “Bible ladies” to go out in the villages and start what today we would call house churches. But after many years, in a time of famine, Lottie Moon gave away her food to her neighbors and eventually starved to death herself. That’s what she understood it to mean to follow Jesus, to give as Jesus gave.

Southern Baptists named their annual foreign mission offering after Lottie Moon, and I have heard many stories of people giving sacrificially to the Lottie Moon Offering. One couple, retired missionaries from Japan, had a son my age who lived not far from me in New Jersey and therefore kept in touch with me. As the father in the family lay on his deathbed, he was visited by the head of the mission board. The old missionary saw who it was and immediately reached for his own left hand. He pulled off his wedding band and said, “Here, I want this to go to Lottie”—giving the only thing he could, giving as Jesus gave.

A few years ago I was browsing through a collection of stewardship helps when I came across something that brought tears to my eyes. There in someone else’s sermon was my grandfather, who died more than 35 years ago, cited as an example of giving. Here’s what it said: *R. C. Daily was a demanding history professor at Ouachita Baptist University. [Granddaddy was famous for giving daily quizzes; some students thought that’s why he was called Dr. Daily.] He once said, “If I can teach preachers to study history, maybe they will do well studying the Bible and become good preachers. I intentionally lose my life in my students and I expect to find it many times over in their lives of service to God.”* I thought about Granddaddy, the old man who by the time I got to know him

was a little like Mr. Wilson in the comics. “Demanding” was a good word for him, although he knew how to tease grandchildren between innings of the Cardinals games he loved to watch. But here was his real heart. He became poor, literally, a Ph.D. giving up a good job during the Depression to teach at a Baptist college in Arkansas for \$1500 a year. He intentionally gave his life to his students in order to make them rich. Among his students was my mother, who learned more from her father than she would have admitted at the time, who learned what it means to give your life away. When God called her to leave the comfort of home and go to postwar Japan, to become poor that others might become rich, she didn’t think twice. The two of them combined to make me rich, and I wouldn’t trade that inheritance for anything.

What are we leaving our children and grandchildren? Are we making them rich -- spiritually? Are we giving in a way that models for our children and grandchildren what it means to become poor so that others might become rich? Someday every toy I ever bought my kids will be gone, every dress outgrown, every car scrapped, every house empty. What will last is the way I lived my life: whether I lived it for myself or gave myself away as Jesus did.