

FAIR SHARES

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

One of the things that's impressed me about IPC is your generosity. In the six months that I've been with you, I've not once heard anyone say that the church is short of money. Financial matters have taken up next to no time at council meetings. Now, I'm sure that won't be the case later in the year as you're putting together a budget, but there has been not need to cajole or exhort you to give more to meet the budget. The only discussion of giving that I've heard is the weekly invitations given by the elders to give generously during the offering.

So I haven't really had the opportunity to talk with you about one of the topics I like best to preach about, which is giving. But since I only have one more week with you, I'm going to seize the opportunity. And I'm not going to talk with you about how much the church needs you to give. It does need you to give, and you do that well. What I want to talk about with you is our need to give.

That's what Paul talks about in the passage we just read from his letter to the Corinthians. We don't usually think of Paul as a fund-raiser, but when he was commissioned by the apostles to spread the gospel, they charged him to take up an offering for the poor in the church in Jerusalem. That's what Paul did, and like so many people who ask for money for the church, he met resistance.

The first objection Paul met was, "We can't afford it. We're stretched to the limit already." His response was simple: If the Macedonians can afford it, you can afford it. Macedonia was a region in northern Greece. The church there faced challenges the Corinthians didn't have to face. In Macedonia they were persecuted for their faith. They sometimes had to hide in order to worship. Paul had to flee Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia, for his life. Yet the Macedonians were eager to contribute to the collection Paul was taking for the church in Jerusalem. The same strong faith that upheld them through persecution gave them confidence and joy to give freely. So Paul said to the Corinthians, "If the Macedonians can do it, certainly you can do it."

Some years ago I had the privilege of attending the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan in the town of Akobo. It wasn't like the General

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Assembly of my denomination. We didn't meet in a large convention center, but under a mango tree by a river. The town was accessible only by airplane – there were no roads. Whenever a plane was heard in the distance, the commissioners looked up anxiously to see if it was a UN plane carrying relief supplies or a government bomber. The homes were all grass huts called tukels. The only electricity was from a small solar generator at the compound where the German missionary nurses lived. The only source of water was from the nearby river where people went to bathe and to draw water for cooking and drinking. The meeting opened with Sunday worship. Before the service, the Canadian missionary who was serving as my host slipped me a bar of soap and said, "This is for the offering." He noticed my puzzled look and explained. "They don't have any use for money here, so put this in instead." When it came time for the offering, large platters were passed around, and the worshipers put in sacks of grain, bandages, t-shirts, and bars of soap. After the service, those offerings were distributed to people in need. Those Christians were truly giving from what they had, not what they lacked.

Our giving unites us with other Christians. It's a sign of our unity in Christ. Paul was so adamant about the Corinthians giving generously because the church depended on it. Not for their financial survival, but because in their giving they received blessings from those to whom they gave.

One of the keys to the vitality of a congregation is how much it gives to Christ's mission beyond its walls, and I think that one of the keys to the vitality of IPC is your commitment to give at least 10% of your budget to missions. We can talk about how we're united with other believers in Christ, but when we give to the mission of the church, we are actually doing something that demonstrates our unity. We invest ourselves in what Christ is doing out in the world, and our giving leads us to deeper involvement that transforms us by putting us closer to what Christ is doing in the world.

But exhortation to give generously wasn't just about keeping up with other churches or claiming the unity that we have in Christ. Paul goes on and explains

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why we need to give to Christ's church. I don't know about you, but I'm bombarded by groups that are asking for my money. They appeal to lots of different things. Some appeal to my sympathy. One group that has a big campaign going now is an organization that fixes cleft palates of children in third world countries. Their ads feature heart-wrenching photos of little children with misshapen faces that tug at your heart. Other groups appeal to your sense of responsibility. In the United States, where colleges and universities depend on private giving to survive, those of us who are graduates, even of state universities, receive a call from a current student once or twice a year to remind us of all the university did for us, and ask us to give something back. Others appeal to our sense of duty. When my local library sent out an appeal for emergency funding, I sent a donation because I wanted to do my duty to see that everyone has easy access to books and other materials. And there's the appeal to ego. I may have given anyway to the capital campaign that the community center was having, but the opportunity of having my name engraved in a brick in its entryway made me dig a little deeper into my wallet.

All of those are legitimate reasons to give, and the world is better for the way they encourage people to share. But none is Paul's reason why the Corinthians should give to the offering for the church in Jerusalem, and none is the reason why we should give. We give because we were created to give. If we don't, then we're denying ourselves one of the greatest sources of fulfillment there is.

Think about it. The book of Genesis in the Old Testament says that God created us in God's image. That doesn't mean God looks like you or I. It means that we were created with many of the same characteristics as God. And what is more characteristic of God than giving? At the heart of our faith is our conviction that everything we have is from God. Psalm 24 declares, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." We see that characteristic of God most perfectly in Jesus who gave his life for us on the cross to take away our sin and everything that keeps us from being the people God created us to be. Through Christ God opens our hearts and our

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minds and our spirits to receive all that God has for us. Christ gives us new eyes to see everything we have as God's gift to us.

The more like Christ we become, the more joy we get from giving because that's what gives him the greatest joy – giving to us. We don't just give out of duty or responsibility or sympathy but because we were made to give. We find the deep joy and satisfaction that God must feel in giving to us.

Sometimes when we give we say we're giving back to God, but we're not really. God doesn't need anything we give. It all comes from God in the first place. Actually, what we do when we give is accept the gift God has given us of taking part in God's generosity. We're like pipes that channel what God has given to others. We're instruments of God's generosity who get to share in the experience of giving.

There's another objection that Paul addressed when he asked the Corinthians to give generously. That's the question of how much is a fair share. The Corinthians tried to calculate how much they should give as compared to others. You've heard that kind of logic in campaigns that say, "If everyone gave just X amount, we'd meet our goal." The implication is that everyone should be expected to give an equal amount. But the Bible has a different understanding of equality. In the Bible equality doesn't mean everyone gives the same thing. Equality means that each gives according to their blessings and receives according to their needs. Paul appeals to that biblical view of equality when he quotes from the book of Exodus and refers to the manna God gave the Hebrews as they wandered in the wilderness. You may remember the story. Every morning when the Hebrews awoke out in the desert, the ground was covered with a white flaky substance they called manna. They were told to collect what they needed for each day and to rest on the Sabbath. Some people, not trusting that they would have enough, collected extra and they also gathered it up on the Sabbath. All of the extra they collected turned rotten and stank. Some people weren't able to gather enough for their families, but they found that God made what they had go far enough to feed everyone in their household.

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That view of equality applies to how God expects us to give. We don't give by watching what others do, but in proportion to what we've received. Some people may say that sounds like Communism. It's not. Communism is where everybody owns everything in common, and you can't give gifts because what you give already belongs to the person you're giving to. Christianity is where we are each given gifts and we freely and in love give them to others.¹ God works through us to see that everyone has enough.

One reason the Old Testament told the Hebrews to tithe, or return 10% of what they earned back to God, was so they could experience the joy and fulfillment of giving generously. There's nothing magical about that number of 10%. In fact, in the Old Testament it was just the baseline. For some people that was the right amount, others needed to give more. It's helpful for all of us to have a benchmark to guide our giving. It's so easy to feel the pressure of other demands on our money that we put off giving. If we do like the Hebrews did and give 10% of what we have off the top, before we pay our mortgage or rent, before we pay our taxes, before we buy our groceries, that has a way of ordering our priorities. I've known many people who tithe or give 10%, and I can also give my personal testimony. I've never known one who said that they didn't have enough. When giving is our priority, the way it's God's priority, then we see the world through God's generosity, not through human scarcity.

Giving generously is a blessing God gives to us every day. It's what it means to live as people who belong to Christ. He gives to us, and his gift is a heart like his – a generous heart.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 73.