

Department of
Philosophy and Missions

GIVING UNDER GRACE

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THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF GIVING

The above may be somewhat misleading if one should expect from it to find in the ensuing discussion a well-rounded treatment of giving in the New Testament. Such a treatment would require division into the following sections: Giving in the Period of Christ's Ministry, Giving in the Church Age, Giving in the Tribulation Period, and Giving in the Millennium. Only the second—Giving in the Church Age—properly falls within the radius of this thesis. But in the wider sense of the term this may be called the New Testament doctrine of giving since the New Testament is primarily devoted to declaring church truth. It has already been seen that the tithe, which was yet in force during our Lord's ministry and doubtless will be again in the tribulation and millennial periods, does not and cannot apply to the church. This is confirmed by the fact that the epistles, supported by scattered passages in the gospels, disclose a full-fledged, well-developed system of giving which relates itself to those grace-principles by which the church is divinely administered, and is diametrically opposed to the legal obligations of the tithe. It is now purposed to examine, classify, and exhibit the various principles which comprise this system of grace-giving.

This has been a completely neglected field of New Testament investigation. It was with no little amazement that the writer discovered not one single book or article, among the many examined, that was devoted to an exposition of New Testament teaching on giving for the church. A few scat-

tered passages were found which mentioned the subject, but these were invariably sandwiched in among scores of pages extolling the benefits of tithing, with no effort made to distinguish the varying principles involved. As shall be noted, tithing and grace-giving share but one factor in common—proportionate giving; in all other points they bear no resemblance. With this word of introduction, it will be proper now to proceed.

I. TEACHING OF THE MAJOR PASSAGES

To attempt a careful survey of the many verses in the New Testament related to giving would be burdensome and, to a large degree, profitless. Notwithstanding, there are three passages of paramount importance which must be minutely studied. First of all, *1 Corinthians 16:1-2*: "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."

It should be noted that these verses constitute a declaration of a universal principle. It is not surprising that this primary passage on Christian giving occurs in the first Corinthian epistle, for it is the particular design of this epistle to give instruction in church administration. This, in itself, should afford sufficient proof that the passage before us was not meant merely to apply to a local problem at Corinth, but is a principle suited to all Christian churches in every age. In addition, the following factors support this conclusion: (1) The epistle is distinctly addressed not only to those at Corinth, but also to "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." (2) This same rule was evidently promulgated in other places as well, certainly in Galatia, Macedonia and Rome as *2 Corinthians 9:2* and *Romans 15:26*, with this passage, attest. (3) The language used makes this rule out to be as fully universal and perpetual as were the previous ordinances regarding marriage, the Lord's Supper, or the support of gospel preachers. "Surely every element of claim upon the purse, or upon the self-denial, of a Corinthian or Galatian exists in respect to

the duty of professed Christians elsewhere!"¹⁸

Beyond any reasonable doubt, then, these two verses, with wonderful conciseness and simplicity, state the common principles by which the church may guide its giving. It is a rule which should be put upon the wall of every place of worship, which should be taught in every Sunday School class, and which should be practiced in every Christian home.

The first of the essential principles of giving developed in this passage is that of the responsibility of each believer to give. Despite modern preachments that "the church is told this" or "the church has such-and-such a mission," one may search in vain throughout the entire New Testament for a single divine command or even entreaty addressed to the church as a whole. It is always the individual believer that is in view. It ought not to be said, then, that the church is responsible to give to the Lord's work. To think in such a vein makes it all too easy for individual members, when the annual church benevolent report is read, to take smug satisfaction in the total amount expended by "their church," though they themselves have scarcely contributed a penny. Unfortunately for them, scripture gives no assurance that God reads the annual reports. The word of God is, "Let every one of you lay by him in store." Each believer sustains a direct and personal relationship to God as real as though he were the only Christian in the world, and it is in the light of that intimate fellowship that he is asked to give.

The basis for this responsibility shall be examined later. It is enough for the present to recognize in the apostolic injunction a universal divine claim on every Christian. As shall be made evident a little later, this is not so much a responsibility as a privilege, and one that can be entered into by all—rich, poor, educated, illiterate, layman or minister. None need miss the blessing of it because of his station in life.

A second factor to be noted here is the basis for determining the amount to give. Paul settles this ubiquitous problem in very few words: "as God hath prospered him." This

¹⁸William Speer, *God's Rule for Christian Giving*, p. 109.

is, of course, nothing else than proportionate giving. Such a practice has the following advantages.

It is fair. It neither lays a grievous burden on the poor, at the one extreme, nor permits the rich to give but a pittance, at the other extreme. Unlike the tithe it asks more, proportionately, from the rich who are able to give, than from the poor who are not. Based on the tithe a rich man could satisfy his conscience by paying \$1,000 on \$10,000 of income, leaving him \$9,000 on which to live, but a poor man, paying \$100 on \$1,000 of annual income would have to struggle to live on \$900 for a year. If, however, the rich were asked to give as God had prospered him, he might well give \$6,000 and live comfortably on the remainder.

It is gracious. No hard and fast proportion is determined, but each is left to settle the amount for himself before his God and his conscience. God asks no more than a man is willing to give, for love abhors a grudging gift.

It reminds the giver of God's blessings. Since the gift is to be proportionate to his prosperity, each time a gift is made the Christian must reflect upon the divine blessings so faithfully lavished upon him. This cannot fail to be a source of greater spiritual strength.

It is private. Only God and the giver know the proportion determined. The miser may hide his wealth from the world but not from God or his conscience. Yet no one sits down to count each gift and reckon if it were properly figured, as under the tithe.

This system of proportionate giving has immense advantages over the usual method of giving at random. The perplexing question of how much to give is settled. Most people would always have some amount at hand and the only question would then be how best to dispose of it. Further, if widely adopted, it would obviate the present distressing practice of wheedling and begging any needed funds for worthwhile purposes. We quote here a cogent statement by Lewis Sperry Chafer on this point. "It is to be feared lest too many of our churches have been trained to respond only

to the insistent human appeal, and this, like some medicine, requires an ever increasing dose to produce the desired effect. All who travel constantly among the churches are impressed with the difference between various congregations in the matter of giving. Where the human pressure has been depended upon for many years, the needed pressure has sometimes reached the point where it produces little more than disgust and weariness of soul. In these instances the medicine is fast losing its potency, even in the most extreme quantities. On the other hand, there are churches where little or nothing is said about giving more than to state the exact facts of the need. In these gatherings the people all know that their own responsibility is personal and to God alone, and under that direct relation to God they discharge their stewardship."¹⁹

A third important principle found here describes the manner of giving. Contrary to the usual practice, the believer is not told to turn in his gift each Sunday to the church treasury, but to "lay by him in store." The word *θησαυρίζων*, translated here "in store," means to gather and lay up, to heap up, or treasure,²⁰ and the reflexive pronoun *ἑαυτῷ* indicates it is to be kept in a private, not public, deposit. This may seem relatively unimportant but it is the very thing that spells the difference between having something to give when it is needed, and having an exhausted treasury because all benevolences were given to the church the previous Sunday. Modern Christians have lost much of the blessing of giving by their practice of allowing the church to distribute all their financial gifts. If this scriptural method be adopted, every home would have its own gift-fund from which money could be taken as the need arose. The following quotation correctly presents early church practice in this respect, though Sunday is not properly termed the Sabbath. "It does not appear that every church member contributed on every Sabbath. . . . Every one was taught to 'lay by in store as

¹⁹L. S. Chafer, *Spirit-Directed Giving*, a pamphlet published by the Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

²⁰Thayer, *in loc.*

God had prospered,' and from this stock to bring as he considered the occasion to require. And yet every Sabbath afforded opportunities of some kind or other, and was honored with gifts from many of the worshipers."²¹

Undoubtedly, too, such giving would be a stimulus to finding needy causes, as another writer suggests: "Giving would become a far greater pleasure than it often is; and certainly asking for money would be far more agreeable than it is, if Christians kept a sum set aside for giving away. Instead of complaining about 'so many calls,' they would be *looking out* for suitable cases to help, and be thankful to those who brought such to their notice."²²

This plan would not, as some might claim, reduce the amount of money received by the church, for it would certainly get each week the major part of each member's benevolent fund, and the interest in giving awakened by this personal distribution of funds would serve to increase the total amount far above that given under any other plan. Here, as elsewhere, it will be seen that God's ways are wisest and best.

Chrysostom, in commenting on the verse, sheds an important light upon the understanding of this rule which prevailed in the East in his day. "He [the apostle] said not, 'Let him bring it into the Church,' lest they might feel ashamed because of the smallness of the sum but, 'having by gradual additions swelled his contribution, let him then produce it when I am come: but for the present, lay it up,' saith he, 'at home, and make thine house a church; thy little box a treasury.' Become a guardian of sacred wealth, a self-ordained steward of the poor. Thy charitable mind entitles thee to this priesthood. Let us make a little chest for the poor at home. Near the place at which you stand praying, there let it be put; and as often as you enter in to pray, first deposit your alms, and then send up your prayer. You would not wish to pray with unclean hands, so neither do it without alms. If you have this little treasury, you have a defence against the devil. You give wings to your prayer.

²¹Speer, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

²²Ernest Boys, *My Lord's Money*, p. 113.

You make your house sacred, having provision for the King laid up there in store.””

Fourth among the principles here discussed is the relation of giving to the Lord's Day. Though it is not stated that gifts should be actually distributed every Lord's Day, yet it is on that day that the blessing of God should be tabulated and the determined proportion of it laid aside for charitable purposes. In view of the gracious character of the Lord's Day, it is exceedingly fitting that that day should be devoted to the worship of giving. Certainly on that day, above all others, ought the believer to be most keenly aware of those spiritual and physical blessings upon which his giving is to be based. To begin the week with a new appreciation of fellowship with the resurrected Lord is to be made more alert to the privilege of sharing in His work through giving, and more aware of the great debt of love and gratitude owed.

There is a real sense in which this laying by of the Lord's money on the first day of the week may be looked upon as an offering of the first-fruits. Such a thought is entirely in harmony with grace, which sees the fulfillment of the type of first-fruits in the resurrection of Christ, itself the very foundation-stone of the believer's present walk. And no act could be more fitting to a Christian than that of offering to his Lord a token of love and gratitude on the very day chosen to honor and glorify that Lord.

But this injunction is not without its pragmatic side as well. Its most practical function is to establish periodicity in giving. It has been well said, "Periodicity is the foundation stone of extensive financial operations."²³ Certainly, modern business transactions could not function without the principle of regular payments, and no other single factor has contributed so much to the present high standard of living in America than this one financial rule. It is little short of

²³John Chrysostom, "Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians," *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, editor, XII, 259.

²⁴Speer, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

amazing to one who has never experimented along this line before, how quickly small amounts will add into large ones. The adoption of a regular weekly time in which to set aside money for the work of the Lord is almost certain to increase the amount given over what was formerly done.

2 *Corinthians* 9:6-8: "But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work." As the former passage concerns itself with the principles behind giving, this one presents the proper attitude of heart in giving. The words "every man" here repeat the injunction of 1 *Corinthians* 16:2 to the effect that giving is an individual, personal responsibility of every believer. Though this has already been discussed, it will not be inappropriate to add here a lucid comment from Charles Hodge on the words, "let every one of you." "It was an important feature of these apostolic arrangements, that the contributions were not to be confined to any one class of the people. The same amount might perhaps have been raised from the rich few. But this would not have answered one important end which the apostle had in view. It was the religious effect which these gifts were to produce in promoting Christian fellowship, in evincing the truth and power of the gospel, and in calling forth gratitude and praise to God, even more than the relief of the temporal necessities of the poor, that Paul desired to see accomplished."²⁵

In view of these spiritual blessings that are the reward of giving, none can afford not to give. Children should be taught to bring their own gifts; women should, like Mary of old, present their own peculiar treasures; every poor man should give that his poverty may be lightened and that, being

²⁵Charles Hodge, *Exposition of First Corinthians*, p. 363.

poor, he might yet make many rich; and the rich dare not fail to give lest the very deceitfulness of riches blind their eyes to spiritual truths.

The words "according as he purposeth in his heart" furnish confirmation, from a different aspect, of the principle involved in the phrase "as God hath prospered," already discussed. This latter phrase, as already noted, looks Godward in a reckoning of the faithful mercies of God, but the words before us now look to the effect on the Christian himself of this counting of divine blessings. It is one thing to list, in an objective manner, all the goodnesses of God; it is yet another thing to be so moved and stirred by those blessings as to freely and gladly "purpose in the heart" to give unto the Lord. But though God's blessings be ever so great, He wants no more in return than that which is freely bestowed. Note, it is what the heart gives (as in the case of the widow's mite), not that which is determined by social pressure or desire to impress others.

But there are also new principles of giving developed in this passage that have not appeared before. The first of these may be termed the proper attitude in giving. This is closely related to what has already been said about what is purposed in the heart, but since Paul is at special pains to point out that a proper attitude is vital to acceptable giving, it deserves separate treatment. It would hardly seem necessary for Paul to add to his exhortation the words "not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver," yet such is the weakness of human nature as to require these admonitions. If men are chilled by a gift without love and are prompt to refuse it, how much more is the God of love bound to reject the begrudged gift? In fact, such a "gift" is not properly a gift at all, but payment of a kind of tax or debt that cheapens all it touches. On the other hand, with what gladness does the Lord receive the gift of one who gives in love! Such is truly a divine gift, for to give is always divine.

“Love ever lives,
 And while it lives, it gives;
 For this is love’s prerogative,
 To give, and give, and give.”

Much has been made of the word *cheerful* in this context. It is often rendered by the word *hilarious*, because of a supposed derivation from the Greek. But it is doubtful if this can be sustained. In commenting on a letter received from a subscriber the editor of *Revelation* magazine says, in point: “Thank God for such giving [from the heart, with prayer]! That is the type of giving which delights the heart of the Lord. At times the Editor has shuddered when he has heard chairmen of meetings, ministers or laymen tell an audience that the Lord loved a hilarious giver, making a sad and ignorant pun on the meaning of the Greek word *hilaros* (2 Cor. 9:7). When it is understood that ‘hilarious,’ in the sense of boisterous joy, has been in use less than a hundred years, and when it is understood that the Greek word is akin to the word for propitiation, the mercy seat, it will be readily comprehended that the kind of a giver which the Lord loves is not one who spends like a drunken sailor, but one who gives as our correspondent describes her present giving. This is the true meaning of *hilaros*, ‘The Lord loveth a cheerful giver.’ The Lord loves a giver who, having been saved, turns back to Him in grateful acknowledgment of what He has done for us, and gives out of a glad thankfulness that our hearts have been made like unto His when we were made partakers of the divine nature.”²⁶

Such happy charity is of the divine stamp and therefore merits the divine blessing. Anything less is churlish and unacceptable.

A second factor evident here is the rule of proportionate return. No proper motive is overlooked by Paul in urging the practice of giving upon his converts. He is careful, therefore, to call their attention to the spiritual rewards toward which they might look in their giving. This law of sowing and

²⁶“Giving with a Difference,” *Revelation*, 19:3 (March, 1949), p. 97.

reaping is referred to also in Galatians 6, which shall be examined in due time. It is enough here to note that he who gives operates under a spiritual law which decrees he shall reap as he sows: to the generous, intelligent giver there will come a rich harvest of blessing, but the miserly believer can only look forward to a scanty harvest commensurate with his sparing gifts. The section closes with a promise that God is able to make material blessings abound, that no Christian need fail to respond to the crying needs about him. This is indeed a challenge to the exercise of faith in giving; and he who confidently trusts God to supply his needs and gives accordingly may, on the strength of this promise, look forward to being divinely entrusted with an ever increasing treasury by which he may sufficiently perform the good works he desires to do.

2 *Corinthians 8:1-12*: "Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; how that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. For to their power, I bear record, yes, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves; praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also. Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love. For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. And herein I give my advice: for this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago. Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a

performance also out of that which ye have. For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not." Though this is the most extended portion of the three major passages, it is the least doctrinal, consisting for the most part of practical exhortations. But in verse 12 the phrase, "if there be first a willing mind," speaks again of the proper attitude in giving. Reluctance in giving destroys immediately the blessings of it, rendering it a vain and empty thing.

Also, the words "according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not" provide a further reference to the basis of determining the amount to give. There is an added thought here that is worthy of comment. God does not demand any commitments from a man to give what is not possessed. Does this not apply to the common practice of obtaining pledges from church members at the beginning of each new year? Certainly it is presumption to promise for the future when we know not what a day may bring forth (James 4:13-14), and this verse declares plainly that God does not require it.

The following succinctly sums up the matter. "It is a great mistake, practically, for pastors to solicit from a people promises to pay so much a week, or quarter, or year, to a round of benevolent or ecclesiastical objects; and to appoint collectors to gather up the money. The plan is burthensome to some, hurtful to all; it lasts but for a time and is thrown away; it is a shift to avoid the neglect of the cultivation of the conscience of the people and the imparting of information and instruction which would make them give from principle. Nothing is gained by rejecting God's plan, which is the only wise one, that which in due time will produce by far the most abundant results, and that which He will accompany with blessings infinitely more valuable than silver and gold. 'Give that ye have,' 'as God hath prospered.'""

An important new principle which arises in this passage shows the root of giving to be a surrendered life. Paul de-

²⁷William Speer, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-49.

clares of the Macedonians, they "first gave their own selves to the Lord." This is the very root from which true giving springs. Surely there is no greater folly than for a person who is living an unworthy life to try to gain the favor of God by large gifts. Man's favor may be gained by this means, but God's cannot. Only the truly surrendered can truly give, for when the whole life in its every aspect is regarded as belonging to God there is no thought of hardship involved in returning to Him what is already His.

It is to be noted in this passage that Paul adduces the example of the Macedonians as those who gave out of "deep poverty." That they gave in the proper spirit is seen in the words "the abundance of their joy . . . abounded unto the riches of their liberality." It is this deep-seated joy in giving even out of poverty that constitutes "hilarious" giving, if that translation be admitted. Also, again, giving is referred to as a "grace," and of such a character that it speaks of the grace of Christ who took upon Himself the poverty of the incarnation that we might achieve the riches of the sons of God. Could any words speak more plainly of the spiritual values of Christian giving and its sacred character?

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