

Christian Stewardship

Be Cheerful Givers—2 Corinthians 9:8–15

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A salient feature of verse seven just completed, and a dominant note throughout the whole stewardship section which the Apostle Paul includes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, is the clear indication that in all giving it is not the size of the gift but the motive of the heart that determines the worth of the gift. God looks only for “cheerful” giving.

The hearer’s reaction may well be, “I would be delighted to give generously, if only I could afford it. I would cheerfully respond, if I could do so without reneging on the other obligations I have.” Paul answers that objection, expressed or implied, and provides the basis for cheerful giving when he directs the believer to God’s limitless resources. Trusting in God and drawing on those resources, the cheerful giver will not come up short for his generosity.

Verse 8

δυνατεῖ δὲ, ὁ θεὸς πᾶσαν χάριν περισσεῦσαι εἰς ὑμᾶς, ἵνα ἐν παντὶ πάντοτε πᾶσαν αὐτάρκειαν ἔχοντες
περισσεύετε εἰς πᾶν ἔργον ἀγαθόν,

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all you need, you will abound in every good work. (The NIV translation is used throughout.)

The word order of the original is significant here. The key word stands at the head of the sentence. “Able is God” (δυνατεῖ δὲ, ὁ θεός). It is not reliance on human resources that is the basis for cheerful confidence in giving, but the limitless ability of God is the ground to which Paul directs his readers when he urges them: Be cheerful givers.

What are the resources on which they may draw? Note that Paul does not promise them a boundless supply of *things*, a wealth of material goods, which would make it possible for them to share without depriving themselves of anything. No, it is quite a different resource that Paul calls to their attention. God is able to make “all grace (πᾶσαν χάριν) abound to you.”

The use of πᾶσαν without an article implies that Paul is putting no limitations on the “grace” which God causes to abound. Neither should we impose any limitations on the scope of God’s χάριν. All the “good and perfect gifts” that come down from the Father of Lights are in view here. We think first and foremost of the Father’s sending of his Son, who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that through his poverty we might be rich. We think also of the gift of his Holy Spirit, who has brought us to faith in that Son and made us the possessors of all spiritual gifts. We think furthermore of a gracious creator God, who has given us life and who richly and daily now provides us with all that we need to sustain that life. All of these things, and a thousand more, are part and parcel of that “grace” which God is able to “make abound.”

By the use of three additional forms of πᾶς Paul attempts to impress on us how fortunate we as recipients of that boundless grace are and how completely supplied we find ourselves. Though separated in the English translation, the three words stand next to each other in the Greek. Paul describes the Corinthians as “in all things (παντὶ) at all times (πάντοτε) having all (πᾶσαν) that you need.” Surely, the Corinthians have adequate resources.

And what is to be the result of such generosity on God's part? What does he have in mind for those whom he blesses so richly? Follow the simple sentence line and you hear Paul say: "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that ... you will abound in every good work."

The Christian is to abound in "every good work." Once more, this time in the word "every," Paul is using a form of $\pi\alpha\tilde{\nu}\varsigma$ (the fifth use in this verse) and again it is without an article. Good works of all sorts are to abound in the believer's life. Paul is by no means restricting the good works in question just to giving or to the stewardship of money. Paul is not always preaching money, as pastors are sometimes charged with doing.

But, on the other hand, neither does Paul hesitate to preach money or giving. God is a cheerful Giver. Children of God, reflecting their true spiritual parentage, will reflect that charity in the cheerfulness of their own giving. And when they do so, they will do it with the realization that they will not come short or be deprived themselves, for they are merely passing on what has first been given to them by the largess of a gracious God. And since he "is able to make all grace abound" toward them, it is not irresponsibility but faith on the cheerful giver's part to say, "There is more where that came from."

But cautiousness, hesitancy and the fear of being irresponsible die hard in us. Paul could well expect his readers to accept the principle enunciated simply on his authority as an apostle. Nevertheless, he illustrates the principle and supports it by turning to the Scriptures. He cites Psalm 112:9:

Verse 9

Ἐσκόρπισεν, ἔδωκεν τοῖς πένησιν, ἡ δικαιοσύνη αὐτοῦ μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

The choice of quotation is a masterly stroke on the apostle's part. Psalm 111 and 112 are a close-knit pair. Both are acrostics and perfectly matched in form. But what is more, they are also connected very closely in their progression of thought, and the two Psalms in combination reflect exactly what Paul has been speaking of here. Psalm 111 speaks of God's generosity in showering his blessings on people, that is, his ability "to make all grace abound" to his creatures. Psalm 112 pictures to us the grateful recipient's response to God's generosity. Here is an example of the "cheerful giver" God is looking for.

Again, we do well to remind ourselves that God's generosity is not limited just to temporal and physical blessings, but includes also and especially the spiritual. Then it will become evident that the unexpressed subject of the verbs in the quotation which Paul cites is the believer. Of the Christian it may properly be said: "He scatters; he gives to the poor; his righteousness remains forever." In this righteousness we see the second aspect of what the apostle spoke about in the previous verse, namely, the abounding "in every good work."

So that the ideal illustrated in Psalm 112 may be reached also in their own lives, Paul now helps the Corinthians to make the application of the enunciated principle to themselves when he says:

Verse 10

ὁ δὲ ἐπιχορηγῶν σπόρον τῷ σπείροντι καὶ ἄρτον εἰς βρῶσιν χορηγήσει καὶ πληθυνεῖ τὸν σπόρον ὑμῶν καὶ αὐξήσει τὰ γενήματα τῆς δικαιοσύνης ὑμῶν.

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

The shift to the picture of sowing will not seem abrupt if we recall the imagery used above. In verse six Paul introduced that concept with his reminder: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

A further reference to this picture may legitimately be seen in the verb of the quotation drawn from Psalm 112. "He scattered" (*Ἐσκόρπισεν*) works very well in describing the activity of the child of God who, like the landowner strewing about handfuls of seed on the prepared seed bed, scatters abroad his gifts to the poor.

It lies in the nature of the case that we don't get very excited about the farmer's "loss" of the seed that he puts into the ground. He will get that back, we reason. But that begs the question a bit as far as Paul is concerned in his urging the Corinthians to be "cheerful givers" or "generous sowers."

Where in the first place does the seed come from for the sower to scatter about on his seed bed? Or to transfer the imagery to the realm of the spiritual in which Paul is operating: Where is the child of God to receive the wherewithal with which to be a cheerful giver? The answer in both cases is the same. The very fact that the sower has seed to sow is proof that there has been a previous harvest. God has graciously *given* him the seed. God is the Supplier.

The same is true for the Corinthians, who on the spiritual plane are being urged to sow generously. "He who supplies seed to the sower will also supply ... your store of seed."

The "store of seed" refers, of course, to the means or the resources with which God's children are to be charitable toward others. God will supply those! It is not the believer's chore to come up with resources on his own. And they are really not his after he has received them. The hymn writer is right in saying, "All that we have is Thine alone, A trust, O Lord, from Thee" (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 441:1).

So God gives the initial supply and Paul promises the Corinthians that this Supplier "will also *increase* your store of seed and will *enlarge* the harvest of your righteousness."

"Righteousness" here is a reflection of the Psalm quotation, where it was said of the cheerful giver, "His righteousness endures forever." As such, the righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) spoken of here is not the righteousness which justifies, but it is rather the righteousness of one who has been justified and who now lives the life of grateful sanctification which follows the realization that he has been redeemed and restored by Christ's saving merit. Such a one will, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, increase in the "harvest of righteousness" and will "abound in every good work," including also the grace of Christian giving.

None of this means, however, that the grace of Christian giving and the stewardship of money can simply be taken for granted. It remains an ongoing task in our own life and a continuing obligation on the part of pastors to follow the lead of the Apostle Paul in helping children of God properly use the "store of seed" that our Lord has supplied.

But when we look for and encourage growth in this area, let us always remember that the appeal must be directed to the New Man. We dare not try to shame people into better performance, nor can we argue or reason them into it. It is, after all, not reasonable that giving away substantial portions of our possessions should increase them. We need to preach and to teach—and to believe for ourselves—that God who loves the cheerful giver will not only provide all that we need but will also, in keeping with his ability "to make all grace abound" to us, "increase our store of seed" and "enlarge the harvest of our righteousness." That is his promise and an article of faith on which we may rest our confidence.

Paul operates with that sure confidence when he asserts in the following verse:

Verse 11

ἐν παντὶ πλουτιζόμενοι εἰς πᾶσαν ἀπλότητα, ἥτις κατεργάζεται δι' ἡμῶν εὐχαριστίαν τῷ θεῷ.

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

There are some grammatical and lexical difficulties that confront us in this verse. First of all, it could be debated whether the verbs here should really be translated as futures. The verb form rendered, "you will be enriched" by the NIV is in the Greek simply a present passive participle (πλουτιζόμενοι —being made rich). For it to be a bona fide future one would have to supply the future of εἶμι and take it as a periphrastic construction. Similarly, κατεργάζεται is a present indicative, not future—though it could, of course, be the so-called "futuristic present."

All of this is complicated by the fact that there seems to be something of a break in the flow of the sentence which is begun here and runs through verse 14. Add to this the fact that there is a lexical problem with the meaning of the word ἀπλότητα. Almost all of the lexicographers and translators assign it the meaning “generosity.” That makes eminently good sense here and would no doubt be the meaning one would settle for if it were not for the fact that the meaning gives us some trouble in verse 13. There the Corinthians’ ἀπόλτης is spoken of as being εἰς αὐτοὺς καὶ εἰς πάντα, “directed toward them, that is, the saints in Jerusalem, and toward all.” The collection as an example of Corinthian generosity is intended for *Jerusalem*, not for *all*. Hence we do better to assign from the beginning a bit broader meaning to ἀπόλτης than merely “generosity.”

Perhaps the safest course is to approach it etymologically. Literally, the word means “simplicity” or “singleness” and the adjective ἀπλοῦς means “single.” Recall the reference in Matthew 6:22 to the eye that is “single” (KJV). The NIV renders it as “good.” The opposite of that is πονηρός (“evil,” KJV; “bad,” NIV). The good eye sees clearly, being sharply focused and seeing only a single outline. Double vision is bad and fills the body with “darkness.”

As a matter of fact, Scripture uses divided interest and divided loyalty in the sense of being a negative characteristic. James speaks of a man who is “double-minded” (δίψυχος, —Jas 1:8). That would be the opposite of having ἀπόλτης, a single-mindedness of purpose which addresses itself consistently to only one goal. Professor Joh. P. Meyer in his *Ministers of Christ* compares the quality of having ἀπόλτης to being like Mary who had learned that only one thing is needful. We might also think of the man who, after putting his hand to the plow, doesn’t look back (Lk 9:62).

The point is, ἀπόλτης is a broader term than one meaning simply “generosity.” Paul speaks of the Corinthians as “in all things being enriched for total ἀπλότητα, single-mindedness of heart.” As we have already indicated, there is a digression in this sentence. When Paul “gets back on track” in verse 13, ἀπόλτης is paired with “the conformity of your confession to the gospel.”

When we see the broad implication of ἀπόλτης, then we are in a better position also to grasp what Paul is claiming for himself when he says that this is a single-mindedness of heart which “*through us* works thanksgiving to God.”

Recall that in the first seven chapters of this letter to the Corinthians Paul has been extolling his office as a minister of the gospel to them. Their single-mindedness of purpose, their conformity to the confession of the gospel, is decidedly the result of Paul’s gospel ministry to them. To be sure, Paul’s service to them includes carrying the collection to Jerusalem, but it should not be restricted merely, or even mainly, to that activity.

Paul’s ministry to the Corinthians, working a Spirit-wrought ἀπόλτης in them, has the blessed and sublime effect of producing “thanksgiving to God.” That concept of thanksgiving to God comprises the bulk of the remaining verses of the chapter and seems, in fact, to be cause of the “digression” in verse 12 that interrupts the flow of the sentence. Note how both verses 11 and 12 end on the thought of this εὐχαριστία to God.

Paul has made the general statement that ἀπόλτης works thanksgiving to God. How is such thanksgiving effected? Verse 12, beginning with a causal ὅτι, states the basis for Paul’s assertion.

Verse 12

ὅτι ἡ διακονία τῆς λειτουργίας ταύτης οὐ μόνον ἐστὶν προσαναπληροῦσα τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν ἁγίων, ἀλλὰ περισσεύουσα διὰ πολλῶν εὐχαριστιῶν τῷ θεῷ-

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

It might be noted that the NIV translators have narrowed the scope of “service” a bit by speaking of “the service *that you perform*.” Actually, Paul does not limit it to a second person plural situation. He speaks in somewhat more general terms when he refers simply to the *διακονία τῆς λειτουργίας ταύτης*, “the administration of this service.”

The term *διακονία* is the one Paul has used regularly in the first seven chapters to speak of his gospel *ministry*. It need not, of course, be restricted only to the full-time preaching ministry. The seven “deacons” received that name by virtue of being given a specific area of service, a *διακονίαν*. While the area of service spoken of most often in the New Testament is spiritual in nature, it need not necessarily be restricted to that. Martha, for example, was distracted *περὶ πολλήν διακονίαν*.

That there be no misunderstanding here as to the thoroughly spiritual nature of the service in which the Corinthians were taking part, Paul adds to *διακονία* the descriptive genitive *τῆς λειτουργίας*. The word *λειτουργία* has a long and honorable history in the development of the Greek language. Originally, it meant service rendered to the state by a private citizen. He might, for example, underwrite the costs of mounting a dramatic production in the annual competition, or he might outfit a warship or construct a public building.

The religious nature of service rendered to the city-state with its patron god or goddess made it very easy for this word to find its place also in Christian literature. Its inseparability from religious activity is attested to by our English derivative “liturgy,” which perhaps more than coincidentally describes what we often refer to as our “order of *service*.”

We have caught Paul’s point if we realize that it is a spiritual activity or “service” which is being carried on in the gathering of the collection. Or to relate it directly to our area of interest in this present study: proper stewardship of money and material goods is decidedly a spiritual activity. It involves not just men and human needs, but God’s honor and glory are involved as well. That is the emphasis of the *οὐ μόνον ... ἀλλὰ καί* clause. Paul says: “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.”

There are *two* aspects involved. To be sure, the one has to do with need. “Shortages” or “lacks” (*ὑστερήματα*) would be filled. That would be for the benefit of the needy believers (*τῶν ἀγίων*) in Jerusalem. Surely, that constitutes a legitimate reason for conducting a collection and for urging the Corinthians to be cheerful givers in supporting it.

It is interesting to speculate why there were so many needy believers in Jerusalem. What I find to be the most satisfying solution is the suggestion that the standard and established pattern of supplying charity and relief to needy Jewish persons was through the temple and, even more so, through the local synagogues.

Becoming a Christian, however, radically altered the believer’s relationship to Judaism and the synagogue. By turning Christian he in effect lost his food stamps, Social Security and Medicare all in one fell swoop.

If severance from Judaism was the reason for a high number of poverty cases not receiving proper attention, that would explain why the church, over and above normal Christian charity, would feel a special obligation to and a responsibility for the impoverished Jewish Christians in its midst. Whatever the cause of the poverty, it is obvious that the plight of needy Jewish Christians was a constant cause of concern. Note the relief work of the seven deacons (Ac 6), Paul’s “famine journey” to Jerusalem (Ac 11:27–30), and the encouragement at the Jerusalem Council to remember the poor (Ac 15; Ga 2:10, and the like).

So, alleviating human need and want was *one* reason for Paul’s urging the Corinthians to be cheerful givers, but it was not the only one. Paul adds as a second reason for cheerful giving: “the overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.”

In connection with improving people’s stewardship, we hear much about the need for information and communication. That need is real. People have to be made aware of the “needs.” The Corinthians had to be told about the plight of the impoverished Jerusalemites in order to respond to their specific need.

But Paul’s two-fold rationale opens our eyes to yet another aspect of stewardship. There is in the Christian an inner compulsion to give even without the external motive of need. There is the compelling urge to express his thankfulness to a gracious God by cheerful giving.

I have heard it stated by a pastor whose grasp on stewardship principles I highly respect that even if there were no need at all and we had to dig a hole in which to bury the money, we would still have to give our people the opportunity to contribute.

I have not spent much time agonizing over that dilemma as a practical problem in the church, but it does illustrate the truth that cheerful giving is not *necessarily* and not *only* need-oriented. Out of gratitude and thankfulness to God who has given all, the grateful child of God simply has to give something back. It is an expression of his own thankfulness to God.

But in writing to the Corinthians Paul actually is picking up a slightly different aspect of thankfulness that will be expressed toward God, and that is: when others, namely, the Jerusalemites, receive the gift given by the Corinthians, then they in turn will lavish songs of praise and thanks on God for what the cheerful giving of the Corinthians and others has revealed to them about the faith and love of their fellow Christians. Then there will be an “overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.” Not Corinthian thankfulness but thanks on the part of others for the Corinthians is the focus of Paul’s attention in verses 13 and 14.

Verse 13

διὰ τῆς δοκιμῆς τῆς διακονίας ταύτης δοξάζοντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ τῇ ὑποταγῇ τῆς ὁμολογίας ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ ἀπλότῃ τῆς κοινωνίας εἰς αὐτοὺς καὶ εἰς πάντα

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

We have already noted that there is a digression in this rather lengthy sentence under discussion (vv 11–14). Verse 12 gives us Paul’s elaboration of the twofold basis for thanksgiving.

In verse 13 Paul returns to the original line of thought, but while the thought progression is clear enough, the grammatical construction never quite seems to get back on track. Before the digression Paul had initiated his sentence with a present participle (πλουτιζόμενοι) referring to the Corinthians. When the sentence resumes at verse 13, Paul continues with a present participle (δοξάζοντες), but this one no longer can be referring to the Corinthians, for it speaks of people “praising God for your (the Corinthians’) obedience to the gospel.”

Who is the subject of this masculine, nominative plural participle? The NIV’s rendering of “men” is a safe and perhaps adequate handling of what is unquestionably a general observation Paul is making about the effect the collection will have. We might, however, venture to become a bit more specific. It seems likely that it is, in fact, the Jerusalem saints in particular who will be praising God.

The occasion for their praise to God is the collection, or as Paul puts it, it will come about “through the approved nature (διὰ τῆς δοκιμῆς) of this service (τῆς διακονίας ταύτης).”

The noun δοκιμή is a thoroughly positive term. To be sure, it refers to a testing, but the assumption is always that of a test successfully passed. Δοκιμή is the stamp of approval which is put on a product that has survived a quality-control check.

“Through the approved nature of this service, namely, the collection,” Paul says, “men will praise God.” That is really the ultimate reason for striving in our life, and for teaching others, to carry on the best possible stewardship practices we can. God will be praised! Alleviating human need, providing satisfaction to the donor and like incentives are certainly factors in giving, but the highest goal needs to remain the honor and praise of God who has given all. We need always to remember: stewardship of goods, even though it deals with hard, tangible, material things, is a highly *spiritual* activity.

Note the things for which the saints in Jerusalem will be praising God. Paul predicts, “Men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ.” The rendering of ὑποταγῆ with “obedience” may be acceptable—though I might prefer the translation “conformity” and link it closely with the adjoining possessive genitive (τῆς ὁμολογίας ὑμῶν), thus giving us the rendering: men will praise God for your confession’s conformity to the gospel. We could perhaps smooth that out a bit with the paraphrase: Men will praise God for the fact that your confession conforms to the gospel of Christ.

Good stewardship practices are a “confession.” They disclose something about our relationship to Christ and his gospel. By their ready participation in the collection the Corinthians will move the Jerusalemites to praise God for the faith of the Corinthians which has moved them to “put their money where their heart is,” if one may adapt an old cliché.

But there is not only a relationship between the giver and the gospel; there is also a highly spiritual relationship between the giver of the gift and its recipients. That forms a second basis for praising and glorifying God.

This second ground for praising God is another dative parallel to the preceding ὑποταγῆ. Paul says, “Men will praise God for the ἀπλότητι τῆς κοινωνίας.” This is that use of ἀπλότης which we previously cited as disallowing the meaning of “generosity.” If that meaning is retained here, then the saints in Jerusalem would be praising God for the Corinthians’ generosity toward them (the Jerusalemites) *and toward all*. The latter is not factual. The Corinthians have not been generous toward *all* believers in the church, only those in Jerusalem.

There is, on the other hand, a singleness of heart and mind that binds *all* believers together, and that “unity of fellowship” (ἀπλότητι τῆς κοινωνίας), as Paul calls it, is indeed a cause of praise and thanksgiving to God, particularly when its ordinarily invisible and intangible nature is demonstrated by a display of love such as the collection.

To be sure, the collection itself is useful and deeply appreciated, but its even greater value lies in that it bespeaks a bond of fellowship which transcends material value. We need to feel that bond of fellowship for ourselves, and we need also to show it toward others. Responsible stewardship of material things which allows us to be generous toward others is one way in which we can actively participate in that fellowship—even with people whom we may not know.

While there is throughout the Christian church a universal fellowship binding together all believers, this somewhat generic entity becomes doubly precious when associated with known believers, with flesh-and-blood brothers and sisters in the faith. Such family ties are a true gift of God and the basis of the highest praise to our Lord. Paul cites this as a third ground for glorifying God when he promises the Corinthians:

Verse 14

καὶ αὐτῶν δεήσει ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐπιποθούτων ὑμᾶς διὰ τὴν ὑπερβάλλουσαν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐφ’ ὑμῖν
And in their [the saints’ in Jerusalem] prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

The verbal here is the participle ἐπιποθούτων, which reflects the emotion of strong and personal affection and the desire to be with a cherished friend so as to share in his company and companionship. That emotion, Paul says, will be expressed in the prayers which the Jerusalem saints will raise to the throne of God. But note that the bond of affection rests not on the fact that the Corinthians are their benefactors, but rather on their being fellow believers in Christ. Their hearts will go out to the Corinthians “because of the surpassing grace God has given you.”

Let us pause a moment to realize what is being said here. Paul is describing a situation that without the “surpassing grace God has given” would be utterly impossible. Jews, who by centuries of separation and studied avoidance of Gentiles had developed a thoroughgoing abhorrence of them, would be served by the charity of believing Gentiles, and in turn the hearts of the Jews would go out to the Gentiles and their lips would overflow

in prayers of praise and thanksgiving for the surpassing grace which God had shown also to non-Jews. And as Paul has been at pains to point out, all of this joy on the part of the saints, and all of the praise and glory to God, will have been occasioned by the collection, by the practice of good stewardship.

As will be evident at once, the Spirit-wrought grace (χάρις) of giving is an invaluable handmaid to the saving grace (χάρις) of God. To that momentous truth there can be but one reaction, the one which the apostle voices when he says:

Verse 15

χάρις τῷ θεῷ ἐπὶ τῇ ἀνεκδιηγῆτῳ αὐτοῦ δωρεᾷ.
Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!