

2 Corinthians 9:6-15
"Why Can't We Keep It?"
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Today we are continuing a series of sermons based on questions that children ask about the Christian life. Back in the Spring as I was preparing for this series, I asked families in the congregation to submit questions that their children have asked in order to give me some food for thought. Many of the questions that were submitted to me had to do with what we do in church, questions like "Why do we put water on babies' heads?" or "Why do we have bread and grape juice in church?" Another question had to do with why we give money in church. To many children, putting our valuable money into a big plate at church seems like a strange thing to do, and you may have heard a child or two ask why we can't just keep that money for ourselves. Why do we give it to God?

Several years ago there was a commercial produced by the United Methodist Church that featured a woman walking around through cities and neighborhoods with various brightly-colored presents wrapped up in big bows. She left the packages on doorsteps and gave them to people she encountered on the street. Obviously she was meant to be a very generous person, but the

commercial ended when she returned to her own home to find one of those packages on her very own doorstep. Someone had taken the time to give her a gift as well, just as she had been wandering her community giving gifts to others. I'm still not really sure how I feel about that commercial. I think I know what it was trying to say, but there's a very real possibility that people will interpret it to mean that Christians give with the hope of getting something in return, especially as the commercial is understood in the context of our self-focused and self-driven culture.

There are plenty of people in our culture who are motivated to give based on what they might receive in return. Think for a moment about the times that you've given clothing, or an old television, or whatever is in the back of your closet to charity. If you're like me, you probably thought about the benefit of getting a tax deduction next April as you did that, didn't you? That's nothing out of the ordinary. Charitable institutions constantly remind people that donations are tax deductible, and they do it because it works. It motivates people to give more when they see a tangible benefit to their giving. Giving leads to getting.

You've also probably heard people describe how good it feels to give something to charity, and you may have even felt it yourself. A very wealthy and successful entrepreneur named John Bryant was once asked why he founded a charity to invest in communities that were poor and forgotten. He answered, "In 1992 I was twenty-six and financially successful but I wasn't happy. I started Operation Hope out of guilt and pain and a need to heal myself. I keep doing it because the key to happiness is to stop focusing on me and start focusing on we. My family still has everything we need, and I feel lucky that I made my decision at twenty-six instead of waiting until I was seventy."¹ Now I certainly wouldn't criticize Bryant's commitment to help others and revitalize poor communities. That's a good thing! He does it because it makes him happy. Sometimes we give because it feels good. Giving leads to getting.

There's also evidence that giving makes you more healthy. Several medical studies, including one by WebMD entitled "Boost Your Health with a Dose of Gratitude," provide significant evidence that grateful people have an edge on overall health. WebMD cites

¹ Bill Clinton, *Giving*, p. 80.

thousands of years of evidence supporting the notion that living a life of gratitude can lead to better physical health.

We also may give because we see some religious benefit in it as well. There's a whole movement of pseudo-Christianity known as the "Prosperity Gospel". It promises that God will bless you in all kinds of financial, physical, and spiritual ways... IF you open up your wallet and send in some money. It's not hard to find a late-night television preacher saying something to the effect of "send me your money and God will bless you more!" They want to make you think that giving leads to getting.

At first glance it might seem like our New Testament reading for this morning endorses this "giving leads to getting" message. "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully," Paul writes. It sure sounds like the more you give, the more you get, doesn't it? But if we look closely, we will see that there's a different message here. It isn't really saying that we give in order to receive something in return. Paul compares Christian giving to *sowing seeds*. Our gifts are released from our hands just as a sower releases seeds. Anyone who has sown seeds before knows that once they're out of your

hands, they are just that - out of your hands! It is by God's blessing that they turn into flowers, or trees, or shrubs, not ours. It is by God's grace that those seeds turn into something much larger. Ultimately when we give, the seeds we sow are not sown for ourselves. We release our gifts to God, that God might bless them and turn them into something much larger than we could imagine. We sow not for ourselves... but for the sake of others whom God would bless through our gifts.

As it is written,

'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;

his righteousness endures forever.'

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. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God.

Here, Paul calls giving "righteous" not because it makes us happier, or more healthy, or more blessed. Giving is righteous because it is a reflection of how God relates to us. It glorifies God because it lets the world see who God is. I'm reminded of another story in the Bible that uses that same imagery of sowing seeds. In

Mark 4, Jesus teaches a parable. "Listen!" he says. "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" The point of the parable is not what the soil does with the seed, but what the sower does with the seed. God continues to sow, and bless, and give, even when our hearts are like dry, rocky ground. Sometimes those blessings take root and grow, but even if they don't, even if our lives are infertile and barren as the beaten path, God's blessings will still find us. The sower continues to rain seeds down upon us in the hope that some will take root and grow.

When we give, we give out of gratitude for this shower of God's blessings. The seeds have rained down upon us and grown into such beautiful things, things that bring our lives such joy, and

wonder, and meaning, and grace. We give because God first gave to us. And we give because we worship a generous God who did not hold back, but emptied himself, that while we were yet sinners we would be saved. Theologian Karl Barth claimed that the basic human response to God is gratitude—not fear, or guilt, or wanting, but thanksgiving. “What else can we say to what God gives but to give praise?” he said.

One day not too long ago I walked into our living room to see A.J. spread out in the middle of the floor with two piles of coins. He loves to collect coins, and he has more pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters than any four year-old should. On that particular day he had separated all of his money into two piles, and was very deliberately examining one coin after another, then placing each one into a pile. I couldn't figure out what criteria he was using to separate the coins, so I asked him. He placed his hand on the first pile and said, "Daddy, this is the shiny money." He then moved his hand to the other pile and said, "And this is the dirty money. That's for the church." I guess he still has a bit to learn about giving, but he's getting there. He used to ask me, "Why can't we just keep it?" But he's started to learn that we are so very blessed in many ways,

and are very thankful to God for what we have. And that's why we give.

I want to leave you with the story of Isabelle Allende, who is an author featured in a collection of interviews from NPR entitled, *This I Believe*. In her interview, Isabelle spoke about our relationship with our material wealth, and what it means to worship a God who gave to the point of emptying himself. She said:

I have lived with passion and in a hurry, trying to accomplish too many things. I never had time to think about my beliefs until my twenty-eight-year-old daughter Paula fell ill. She was in a coma for a year, and I took care of her at home until she died in my arms. There was nothing to do but cry and remember and to reflect on my journey and the principles that hold me together. When my daughter lay paralyzed and silent and in her bed, she taught me a lesson that is now my mantra: You only have what you give. It's by spending yourself that you become rich. Paula had given her life away essentially. Gave her life to others, serving, helping, volunteering. When she died she had nothing but a heart full of love... The pain of losing my child was a cleansing experience. I had to throw overboard all excess baggage and keep only what is essential.

She concluded:

Give, give, give . . . what is the point of having experience, wisdom, or talent if I don't give it away? What is the point of having wealth if I don't share it?"²

"What's the point?" She asks. Listen...

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'

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. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God... for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints

² *This I Believe*, pp. 13-15.

but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

That's the point. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Amen.