

# **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(February 6, 2011)

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Sermon manuscript

## **Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC**

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

### **Return on Investment**

(2 Corinthians 9)

Study #14

#### **Introduction: Planting shade trees...**

Trees, as you know, differ in quality. Some trees, native to this area, grow slowly, put down a great root system, and live for generations.

Other trees are fast growers that are impressive in the early years. But they are not really fit for South Texas. They aren't drought tolerant and may succumb to disease. They decline after a couple of decades.

I've had some experience planting trees, and now pin my hopes on trees such as the cedar elm (NEVER to be confused with the mountain cedar!), the Monterrey oak, the Live Oak (if oak wilt can be avoided), the crepe myrtle, and a few other quality trees.

It is my fond hope that some of the trees I've planted lately will provide shade for the next 50-75 years - and yes, that's long past the time when I'll enjoy the shade!<sup>1</sup>

This morning, we're going to think about the spiritual equivalent of planting shade trees. We're talking about money, again.

The Apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 9 that when we give money to meet human need in Jesus' Name and when we give money to resource the work of God, it's like planting a great tree: we make an investment in the future that will bless others and that will benefit us.

These days, everybody is concerned to make wise investments with their money. Well, no matter how you slice it, THAT's an impressive return on investment!

*Setting the context...*

Last Sunday we began to work our way through a two chapter section of 2 Corinthians dedicated to the theme of financial generosity.

The situation revolves around the desperate need of believers in the land of Palestine who were suffering from the double whammy of a famine plus persecution.

When Paul told the Corinthians Christians about the need, there was an immediate flurry of enthusiasm. But then, exactly nothing happened. No money was collected. The Corinthians had somehow missed that "give" is a verb, an action word!

Well, Paul wrote what we find here in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 to encourage these folks in Corinth to *actually* give. And what he has to say to them will prove enormously helpful to us, today.

Paul established the church at Corinth and lived and worked with them for eighteen months. During the time that he was with them, he taught them as much as he could about the Christian life.

We know that his teaching must have included instruction about contributing to the needs of fellow believers and ministering through money because of what he says at the very beginning of chapter 9.

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<sup>1</sup> I came across this quote some time ago, and it rings more and more true with each passing year. G. Elton Trueblood said, "A man has made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when he plants shade trees under which he knows full well he will never sit."

## Priming the Pump to Give (vv. 1-5)

### “Readiness” is One Thing (vv. 1-2)

*You know all this, already...*

**[1] For it is superfluous for me to write to you about this ministry<sup>2</sup> to the saints**

*“Shoot, you guys know this stuff so well, that it’s pointless for me to even mention it. You could teach this stuff. You passed the Dave Ramsey FPU course with flying colors. You’ve got it all down cold.”*

And then he goes on to talk about **“this ministry to the saints.”**

What that tells us is that the lesson hadn’t made the critical eighteen inch journey from head to heart. They were suffering from a crisis of application. Paul met that crisis head on.

Right off the bat he commended them for their enthusiasm for the Jerusalem Famine Relief Offering project. That enthusiasm is described by the word “readiness.” And their readiness proved to be a powerful motivator to observers.

*The power of a “ready” example*

**[2] for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the Macedonians, namely, that Achaia has been prepared since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them.**

The city of Corinth was the largest, most influential and prosperous city in the whole region of Achaia.

So, when the Macedonians heard that the Corinthians were excited (note their “zeal”) about giving money to meet the need in Jerusalem, they got excited, too. They figured that the project must be legit and they wanted to partner with Corinth.

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<sup>2</sup> The word we translate “ministry” is the Greek “diakonia” which means, simply, service. It is used to describe such wide-ranging activities as giving, table-waiting (Acts 6), preaching, and evangelism.

Today, you may hear of a “matching gift” challenge put out by a person with means. He’ll announce that he will match dollar-for-dollar whatever anyone else gives to a certain project. A matching gift offer will encourage others to give because they know that every dollar they give will be doubled by the philanthropist’s gift.

That’s what’s happened up north in Macedonia where Paul is. They have heard about the Corinthians’ enthusiasm for the Jerusalem project, and so they are even more motivated to give!

The problem is, though, that while the relatively poor Macedonians gave, the wealthier Corinthians didn’t.

So, the zeal of the Corinthians had first encouraged the Macedonians to give. Now Paul turns the tables and uses the genuine generosity of the Macedonians to move the Corinthians to actually give!

### “Prepared” - That’s the Thing! (vv. 3-4)

**[3] But I have sent the brethren, in order that our boasting about you may not be made empty in this case,<sup>3</sup> that, as I was saying, you may be prepared; [4] otherwise if any Macedonians come with me<sup>4</sup> and find you unprepared, we - not to speak of you - will be put to shame by this confidence.**

In the military, there are varying levels of preparedness for combat. On the day that a recruit signs on with the armed forces, he or she necessarily is willing to fight.

But, willingness is not the same thing as preparedness. Preparedness involves physical conditioning, mental toughening, learning military history, becoming familiar with weapons systems, and more.

On the day that the enemy attacks, the recruit is not only **willing** but **prepared**.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul didn’t misrepresent the Corinthians to the Macedonians. But, he was in the habit of seeing the best in people and presenting them in this light to others.

<sup>4</sup> Paul evidently had every intention of traveling to Corinth and following up with the collection efforts of Titus and the two brothers.

The Corinthians were ready and willing but they were NOT prepared. And Paul wants them to make that all-important step toward preparedness.

So, he urges preparation. That meant, “*Set aside money to give.*”

Today, he might urge any of us, “*Make a budget. Decide to get out of debt so that you can be as generous as you want to be.*”

Then he addresses one more issue. Integrity. When it comes to the matter of finances, safeguarding integrity is crucial.

And to ensure integrity in the matter of this Jerusalem project, Paul took a bold step. He sent three men to oversee the collection in Corinth.

### **Safeguarding Integrity (v. 5)**

***[5] So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, so that the same might be ready as a bountiful gift and not affected by covetousness.***

The sending of these three men was the theme of 8:16-24. There, he referred to them as Titus, “*the brother*” and “*the other brother*” (which, for some perverse reason has always brought to mind the old Bob Newhart show and the three ex-cons who always introduced themselves as “Larry, my brother Darrell, and my other brother Darrell” - sorry).

These guys were sent to serve as overseers of the collection. They were to ensure that everything was on the up and up, that an offering was really collected and that there was nothing shady about how it was being taken up.<sup>5</sup>

As it was then, so it is now critically important that a ministry collect finances in a way that is above reproach - no resorting to arm-twisting or to guilt motivations or to heavy-handed emotional pleas.

And the money given to a ministry must be handled with great integrity, too. Multiple eyes on offerings, good controls on expenditures, personal spending accounts overseen with care. Only one set of books.

(I’ve prepared a one sheet summary of some of the ways we try to safeguard integrity with finances here at Northwest, and I urge you to pick up a copy of it this morning. The Elders here highly value the trust you’ve placed in this ministry by your financial partnership and we welcome any questions you may ever have about the handling of money.)

Among the first principles when it comes to the whole matter of how we deal with money is integrity. God wants our personal financial lives to be above reproach. And the same is to be true for the financial life of a church.

So far, we have listened to him tell us that we should finish what we start (fellowship) and that we should give - and pledge to give - based on what we have, not based on what we don’t have (faith).

But Paul isn’t finished. There is more he wants us to know about the ministry of generosity.

### **Attitudes to Nurture when it comes to Giving (vv. 6-14)**

#### **God Loves Hilarious Givers (v. 7)**

*Give what you want to give and don’t give what you don’t want to give*

***[7] Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.***

I am going to refer to a couple of the ideas here as the FIRST and SECOND Dave Smith principles of giving. (I haven’t seen these two ideas listed anywhere else, so I’m gonna claim them.)

First, “*Give what you want to give.*”

That’s right. It is up to each of us to decide what we are going to give, financially.

<sup>5</sup> Accountability functions as an impetus to action. It also serves to protect believers from our own disobedient tendencies, which would result in humiliation and dishonor.

It is up to each one of us, before God, to determine what we are going to give to meet human need in Jesus' Name and to resource Kingdom of God work.

God wants our giving to come from an expansive, not a grudging spirit. Each believer and each believing family is to make personalized decisions as to how much they are going to give.

Paul doesn't impose a quota on the church at Corinth and he doesn't impose a quota on us. And here may be as good a place as any to address the subject of tithing.

"Tithing" is a word that you hear tossed around a lot at church, and I think it is important that we understand what the tithe is, biblically, and what the tithe means for us, today.

In the Old Testament, the tithe (the word actually means "a tenth") was basically a tax. The money raised by the tithe went to support the Jewish priesthood, which, in a theocracy, was the government. The tithe was an obligation.<sup>6</sup>

Corresponding to the Old Testament tithe, Paul tells Christians to support the government under which they live (for the Romans, a monarchy; for us, the United States government) by paying taxes. We are to pay taxes today for the same reason the Old Testament Jews tithed: to keep the government running.

But in Old Testament times there were sometimes special projects that needed funding, or there were needy people to be helped, or a person might have just wanted to make an offering to the Lord.

For each of these special occasions, special offerings were taken up<sup>7</sup> and special sacrifices could be offered. These were called "free-will" offerings, and, as the words imply, they were gifts given according to what was in the individual Jews' heart.

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<sup>6</sup> The Old Testament was very explicit about tithing, and there were several different tithes required of a Jewish citizen. The "whole tithe" represented between 22% and 30% of a Jew's annual income.

<sup>7</sup> See Moses' collection for the tabernacle (Ex. 35:5-7 (36)) - where more than enough was raised because the people had willing hearts.

The formula for Christian giving today is just what Paul says here: do as you have purposed in your heart.

No set percentage and no set amount is suggested for the support of God's work. Not 5% or 10% or 20%. Not \$10 or \$100 or \$1,000. Give what you want to give.

If there was ever a place where the mention of a tithe would make sense, it is here in 2 Corinthians 8-9 where the whole major section is about giving money. And Paul doesn't even utter the word. (And, truth be told, nowhere in the New Testament is it ever even hinted at that we are to give 10 %.)

Many people get a cramp in their wallet when they hear a preacher talking about money. But relax. Give what you want to give.

The second of the Dave Smith principles of giving, also derived from 2 Corinthians 9:7, follows: *Don't give what you don't want to give.*

Isn't that exactly what Paul says here? Don't give "***grudgingly or under compulsion.***"

Nobody's holding a gun to your head to force you to give. If you don't want to give something, don't give it.

In the church, there is to be no compulsion or pressure on anyone to give.

If we are only giving because of an external force, there will be no joy. And if nothing else is clear from this verse, it is that God wants us to give joyfully!

*Smile when you give that*

***[7] Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.***

God wants you to have a great time with your giving.

The phrase, “*God loves a cheerful giver*” is not to imply that He doesn’t love a stingy person. He loves stingy people, too. But, He especially enjoys someone whose heart overflows in happy generosity.

This is the guy who doesn’t just laugh all the way to the bank. He also giggles while he writes out the check! He sits there with a twinkle in his eye, thinking to himself,

“*Man, what a treat to be able to give toward what God is doing in this church.*” Or “*I can’t believe that I have the privilege of giving money to meet this person’s need. What a hoot!*”

God doesn’t measure how much money I give against the amount of money you give.

He measures the value of the gift by the spirit of love in the giver. The true measure of a gift is not its quantity or magnitude, but the state of the giver’s heart.

I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that if we part with our money and then grieve its loss, God would prefer we kept it. He enjoys our generosity, not when we give through clenched teeth.

So, give what you want to give and give with a smile on your face. And give with a view to a harvest.

Look at verse 6 and you’ll see that Paul compares giving to the farmer’s seasonal activity of sowing seed.

### **God Provides for the Giver (vv. 6, 8-11)**

*Bountiful sowing; bountiful harvest (v. 6)*

***[6] Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.***<sup>8</sup>

When the farmer sows, there is no questioning the fact that he has truly lost something. He has lost his seed.

But the wise farmer gladly gives up that seed because he knows that the only way to get a harvest is to put the seed in the soil.

Can you imagine a farmer holding on to his seed, or grieving over the loss of seed? If he hangs on to his seed, he will never receive a crop.

The agricultural truth is obvious, but Paul isn’t writing about wheat and oats. The *topic* is giving money to fund ministry and to meet needs. And the *point* is that to give money is to sow spiritual seed.

When we give money to the things of God, that money isn’t lost. It is invested.

Think again about the seed.

The farmer’s seed appears to be a dead thing. It just sits there. But when it’s placed in the right environment (soil) and given the right amount of temperature and moisture, life breaks through the hard husk of the seed.

Same thing with money. Obviously, there is nothing alive about money. It is dead. But, when we place our money into the environment of human need or into the environment of ministry for Jesus, this lifeless thing begins to bear fruit.

We’ll look at the specific harvest financial investments can bring shortly. For now just notice that the kind of harvest we can expect from our giving is directly tied to the kind of sowing we do.

If we want a puny crop, we’ll just sow a little bit. If we want a rich, bountiful harvest, we’ll sow extravagantly.

Now, when I prepare a message on a passage, I usually look for a train of thought, a progression from one verse to the next. And Paul usually doesn’t disappoint, because he’s a pretty logical guy.

But the longer I looked at 2 Corinthians 9:8-11, the more convinced I became that there is not so much a progression of thought as there is a matter of Paul saying the same thing in several different ways.

For instance, in verse 8, we read it and think, “*Man, what a conglomeration of superlatives!*”

<sup>8</sup> See Galatians 6:7, the law of the harvest.

*Eager giving unleashes God's supply (vv. 8--11)*

Abounding in superlatives! (v. 8)

***[8] And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed***

Abundance is mentioned or implied six times in this one verse. Paul is giving a promise that God will supply resources to you and me so that we will be able to meet needs.

We read the same message, just from a different perspective, in the next verse.

An ancient "for instance" (v. 9)

***[9] HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ABIDES FOREVER.<sup>9</sup>***

This is an Old Testament quote (from Psalm 112) referring to - not the Lord - but to the righteous man. The upright will be blessed by God in such a way that he (or she) will be privileged to be able to meet needs in God's Name.

Both verses eight and nine tell us that if we are willing to give, God is willing to make it possible for us to give.

OK. A brief period of throat-clearing is in order.

Paul is NOT saying that the generous Christian will always be assured of such a high standard of living that he will be able to act charitably towards others.

As a generous Christian, he himself experienced the exact opposite and frequently had to depend on the generosity of others for support!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> People are often shocked when they first realize that this verse is not speaking about God, but man!

But, Paul is promising that God will see to it that the Christian with a heart for generosity will always be supplied with the means to engage in **some kind** of good work; that there will always be **some way** for him or for her to be a blessing. It may be with money, or it may be with a helping hand, a warm smile, or a fervent prayer. But God will provide a way for you to give.

If we are miserly, we may accumulate a lot of money, but our hearts will be as pinched as our pennies and we will be strangers to joy.

If, on the other hand, we catch the vision of generosity, we'll hold our possessions with a loose hand and find that God will fill our hand so that we'll be able to keep giving SOMETHING.

Gifted to give (vv. 10-11)

***[10] Now 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<sup>11</sup> [11] you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God.***

As he describes the sequence of the food supply line - from seed to bread - Paul wants us to remember that all good gifts come from God.

It is God who has supplied you with "seed" (ie. - the money or the material resources you are investing for His purposes) and it is God who will use that "seed" to bring blessing to people, for His sake.

Jesus once performed a tremendous miracle that serves as a living illustration of this very thing.

On a hillside in Palestine, Jesus accomplished a great work (feeding 5,000) through an insignificant gift (a boy's lunch of a few fish and loaves). That's what God does. He takes gifts that we might deem insignificant, and multiplies them.

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<sup>10</sup> Even Paul's own experience - as an apostle for heaven's sake! - mitigates against the understanding that a Christian is guaranteed a standard of living high enough to enable him to be limitlessly charitable. (Phil. 4:12; 2 Cor. 11:23-33)

<sup>11</sup> Paul combines words and phrases from several O.T. passages (Isaiah 55:10; Hosea 10:12)

God will take your gift of whatever amount - be it a check with a bunch of zeroes on the end or a plastic bag filled with change - and bring a harvest way out of proportion to the size of the gift if it comes cheerfully from a full heart.

The Bible says that the harvest of such giving is incredibly bountiful. Two particular crops are listed as Paul heads for the end zone. (There, Super Bowl fans...)

### God Blesses When we Give (vv. 12-14)

*Worship flows as receivers receive (vv. 12-13)*

***[12] For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. [13] Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all***

Those who receive your gift will be prompted to worship God.

When you give a gift to your friend, and you're not trying to draw attention to yourself and what a grand example of godliness you are, but are simply seeking to help your friend, your friend will be drawn to worship the God who prompted you to give in the first place.

When the missionaries our church supports - and a few of the missionaries we support serve in some pretty dark and dangerous places - and when they receive word that we have sent money to supply their living expenses and to support their ministry, they worship God.

When someone one of our missionaries speaks to finds out that the missionary is there, at least in some measure, because of the generosity of some Christians back in San Antonio, Texas, that Moroccan, or Sudanese, or Hindu who hears the message of the Gospel from our missionary worships God, who put it on our hearts to partner with that missionary.

When someone leaves our church building with a couple of bags of groceries, knowing that they will have food for at least the next couple of days, they leave worshipping God for His people's generosity.

How's that for awesome? God takes money (what in one place Jesus called "*the mammon of unrighteousness*") and uses it to prompt worship.

Another crop that giving produces is friendship, relational bonding.

*Givers and receivers bond (v. 14)*

***[14] while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you.***

It's not unusual for someone in our church to approach me with a gift to give to someone else, because they want to give anonymously. I understand the desire to give anonymously. That kind of giving can be really good.

But it would be wrong to think that all giving should be anonymous. It sure wasn't in the matter of the Jerusalem relief offering!

The Jerusalem Christians would know full well that the Corinthian Christians had given to meet their need. And because they knew who was doing the giving, not only would they worship, they would also be bonded to the Corinthians in gratitude.

It's not wrong for you to let the person you are helping know that it is you who is doing the helping. Send a cashier's check in the mail if you want to.

But there's nothing wrong with walking up to a friend and shoving a \$5 bill or a check for \$500 into his hand while you tell him,

*"You know, brother, the Lord has really put you on my heart lately. I know you've been going through a tough time. Well, God's allowed me to have a bit more than I need these days and I just wanted to have some tangible way to tell you that I love you."*

I guarantee, your relationship with that friend will never be the same. There will be a bond between you till the end of time.

Giving does all sorts of great things.

- It prompts worship, and...
- It serves as a drain plug to our greed, and...
- It is a glue that can create great friendships.

So, now we come to the end of Paul's two-chapter instruction about money and generosity. We wonder how he's going to end.

### **Conclusion:**

Paul ends this two-chapter focus on giving with these words -

*[15] Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"* (v. 15)<sup>12</sup>

Bottom line?

- We don't give because we feel guilty.
- We don't give because we think that by giving we'll earn God's love.
- We don't give so that others will think well of us.
- We don't give because, well, we really OUGHT to.

We give because our God is a giving God.

He loved the world so much that He GAVE His only begotten Son and we seek to imitate His giving ways by becoming givers, ourselves.

And we give because, frankly, our giving God loves to reward us when we imitate His giving ways.

So we eagerly give, knowing that our giving God will see to it that our Return on Investment is better than anything Wall Street could ever offer, both in this life and in the life to come. (check out Matthew 6:19-21)

*[9:8] And God is able to make all grace abound to you,  
so that always having all sufficiency in everything,  
you may have an abundance for every good deed*

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<sup>12</sup> By the way, the Corinthians did come through - cf. Romans 15:25ff