The Apostle Paul Reflects on Principles of the Harvest

A Dramatic Monologue

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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 I had a tricky problem concerning the Corinthian Christians. I wanted to motivate them to fulfill their previously given pledge to help out with a special offering for the poor Jewish Christians in Judea who were suffering from famine. In addition, many were persecuted. Some were kicked out of their families or had their businesses boycotted because they named Jesus as their Messiah. But some false teachers had come into Corinth. They distorted the gospel and spoke ill of me. They acted high and mighty. They were full of self-confidence and boastful talk. They spoke against me and undermined the confidence that the Corinthians had placed in me. How was I going to motivate them to fulfill the pledge that they had given without making them feel resentful? I did not want to pile guilt upon them. Yes, God wants his people to be generous and give. But God is not poor. He is not begging for us to help him out with his desperate plight. As the psalmist said, *“The cattle on a thousand hills is his.”* God wants us to learn to give because we need to learn to be givers. God loves a cheerful giver, not someone who gives because someone is holding a knife at his throat.

 I have learned that part of the problem we all face when it comes to the matter of giving is the problem of perspective. If our perspective is limited to the material world and the present time, then we naturally think that right now and what I have for me is all that counts. Why would one want to give away what he has to somebody else? “His problems are not my problems! Am I my brother’s keeper?” That is a natural way of thinking for the one whose perspective is limited to the material world and the present time. But how our outlook changes when we understand the spiritual world and gain the perspective of eternity! We come to realize that our real material needs are fairly small. If we have food and clothing and shelter, that's all we really need.

 Our contentment in life, our satisfaction with life, our happiness is not really derived from our material station. It is derived from within. As I wrote to the Philippians, “*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength*.” (Philippians 4:11b-13) I have learned that my contentment comes from my relationship with Jesus Christ. He gives me joy within. He gives me a peace which passes understanding. He fills me with his love and grace. As a result, I am not enslaved to needing to hold on to all that I can from my material goods. I'm free to give to God and free to give to others.

 The Christians in Corinth were city people. Corinth was one of the larger cities in that part of the empire. Nevertheless, I figured that people should understand something basic about farming. If you don't plant very many seeds, you're not going to get much of a crop. Think of a farmer who has a bushel bag full of wheat. It comes time to sow his wheat seeds into the field, but this farmer decides that he had better horde his wheat seeds and keep them for future needs. So he just throws a handful of seeds in the field. What harvest do you think he's going to get? Not much! Now think of a farmer who sows his seeds liberally in the field, making sure to get some in every part, every corner. This farmer will reap a full and bountiful harvest!

 Well, the same principle applies spiritually to our giving. If we sow sparingly in our giving, then we will reap sparingly in our blessings. If we sow generously with our giving, then we will reap generously with God's blessings. That is the way life goes.

I so much wanted these Corinthian Christians to understand that it was in their best interest to be generous givers. When we give of our resources to God, it's not like throwing them away. It's like investing them. It's like sowing seed into the field, which then grows and produces even more than you started with. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not promising that if you become generous givers, then you will necessarily become materially rich. God may bring great material blessings your way, but there's certainly no guarantee of that. Our Lord Jesus Christ never was a rich man. None of his apostles were rich men. I've experienced some times of great material blessing. There have been times when I've been able to stay with wealthy people in very comfortable homes and eat some of the finest food and drink some of the finest wine available. But it's not always that way. There have also been many other times I just haven't had enough to eat or when I have had to sleep out on the road. But even in those times I feel rich with God's presence. But as I have given myself and my possessions to the Lord, I have always been blessed so much that I consider myself very rich and a very fortunate man.

 So with these things in mind here is part of what I wrote to the Corinthians, "*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously*.” (2 Corinthians 9: 6) I wanted them to get the picture that a life that's full of contentment and richness, a life that has an abundant harvest is a life that is characterized by generosity. If we sow sparingly, we are not going to reap much. But if we sow bountifully in generosity, we reap a rich harvest.

 “*Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver*.” (2 Corinthians 9: 7) Giving is a very personal matter. Each one has to make his own decision. Learning this was a switch for me. When I lived under the Law of Moses, all of the required offerings were spelled out. What the scriptures did not make exactly clear, the tradition of the rabbis did. I knew exactly what I had to do and knew that I did not have to do more than what was required. But under Jesus Christ, God has made things different. We are not under a law of obligation. Each of us must decide in our own hearts what we want to do, based upon what we have, based upon what we know of how God works, and based upon how much faith we have.

 Under the Law of Moses many gave their tithes and offerings reluctantly. We often felt a sense of compulsion. We knew that we had to do this or else. The threat of lawbreaking and its consequences was always upon us. But now God loads us up with his grace and then asks us to become gracious givers. God doesn't want you to give out of compulsion or reluctantly. God doesn't want you to give just to look good to your neighbor. God loves a cheerful giver. God himself takes joy in giving and loves to reproduce that quality in us so that we take joy in giving as well.

 “*And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work*.” (2 Corinthians 9: 8) Some people think I got a little carried away with this verse. I admit that I was a little bit strong in saying, "all things … all times... all you need… every good work." But you can get my point, can't you? God takes care of us! He is able to take care of us and enable us to have enough to be givers as well.

 I know that people hold back from giving out of fear. “If I give away part of what I have, then I'm going to run out. I won't have enough to take care of my needs.” That is thinking about life without taking God into your thinking. I wanted them to understand and believe what I deeply believe and have experienced, that God will take care of you if you trust him. Jesus Christ himself told us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and trust that God can take care of our physical needs. I wanted these Corinthian Christians, and you as well, to be freed from fear and to replace fear with trust. We don't know what the future holds. Right around the corner there could be some big problems requiring abundant resources from us. The money that we give away today might be needed tomorrow or next month. But that is not the whole story. We have to put God into the equation. We are free to become givers when we understand that God will take care of us. That is the point I was trying to get across.

 “*As it is written: ‘He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’”* (2 Corinthians 9: 9) Do you recognize my quotation? I was quoting from Psalm 112. Maybe you are not familiar with the Psalm. The verse I quoted might look like it's referring to God because the same phrase, “his righteousness endures forever” is used for God in Psalm 111, which speaks of God taking care of those who trust him and giving them food and supplying their needs. But in Psalm 112 these words refer to the godly person who reflects God's character. This Psalm is a wisdom teaching like we find in the book of Proverbs. It is not stating absolute truth that has no exceptions. Rather, it is stating an ideal which generally holds to be true. You probably don't read Hebrew, but, if you did, you would see that this Psalm is written as an acrostic. In other words, each line begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet starting with aleph, then bet, and so forth. Here is the psalm

*Praise the LORD.*

*Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who finds great delight in his commands.*

*His children will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
Wealth and riches are in his house,
and his righteousness endures forever.
Even in darkness light dawns for the upright,
for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man.
Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely,
who conducts his affairs with justice.
Surely he will never be shaken;
a righteous man will be remembered forever.
He will have no fear of bad news;
his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD.
His heart is secure, he will have no fear;
in the end he will look in triumph on his foes.
He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor,
his righteousness endures forever;
his horn will be lifted high in honor.*

*The wicked man will see and be vexed,
he will gnash his teeth and waste away;
the longings of the wicked will come to nothing.*

 Hopefully, the point of the Psalm is clear to you. The righteous, God fearing man is generous and is blessed for his generosity, but the man who rejects God, called the wicked man in this psalm, is not generous and does not end up with a life of blessing. Getting back to 2 Corinthians, one of the reasons I chose verse 9 is because of the word "scattered." Remember that I just talked about sowing generously? The word "scatter" can be used of sowing. The farmer scatters his seed. The generous man scatters his wealth to help others. So the verse I quoted from Psalm 112 seems very appropriate. Accordingly, I continued in 2 Corinthians with words using this agricultural image. “*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. 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*.” (2 Corinthians 9: 10-11) In the next lines I wrote, I wanted the Corinthians to see that their giving this gift was so much more than just giving some money. It was creating a circle of blessing. They would give the gifts. The poor Christians in Judea would be blessed by having their physical needs supplied. They in turn would overflow with expressions of thanksgiving to God. Then they in turn would pray for God to continue to bless the Corinthian Christians. A bond of unity would be forged between them. A circle of blessing would be created.

 Here is how I continued, “*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. 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. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.”* (2 Corinthians 9:12-14)

 In verse 13 I wrote this phrase, "the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ," because generosity is not something that should be really extraordinary. We who are Christians claim that Jesus Christ is our Lord. Jesus Christ himself modeled giving for us, giving of the utmost kind. You might remember that I wrote in chapter 8 verse 9, "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*." We cannot be followers of the one who gave in this way without becoming givers ourselves. So you can see that our becoming givers is simply our being obedient to the implications of the gospel.

 I finished this section of the epistle – what you read as chapters 8 and 9 - with an expression of praise that just had to come out of me, “*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*” (2 Corinthians 9: 15) Behind all our giving is the giving of God. He has given us so much in Christ. Can you imagine giving up your son in death to save some unworthy people? That is what God did! He gave his only Son! Such an indescribable gift! He chose us in Christ. He forgave us in Christ. He redeemed us in Christ. He adopted us into his family in Christ. He gave us new life in Christ. He made us joint heirs with Christ of eternal blessings. He gave us a hope and a future in Christ. He raised us with Christ to new life and seated us with Christ at an unbelievable position at the right hand of God the Father. He gave us an insight into the wisdom of the ages so that we can know what life is all about and where we are going because we can know that all things have been done by God the Father so that in all things Christ might have the supremacy and that all things in the whole universe find their meaning and culmination in him at the end of all time as we know it. We get to know that, while so many others are just wandering around making up meaning to life or living on the basis of myths and make believe stories. Such an indescribable gift that we have!

 Do you see what I was trying to communicate to the Corinthians? Their situation was particular but these truths are universal. They apply to other churches. They apply to you as well as the Corinthians. I wanted them to see that God is calling us to a voluntary response in our giving that we can be joyful about. But he also wants us to see beyond the here and now, beyond the needs and pleasures of today. God wants us to see that his disposition is to bless us and if we will trust him and give ourselves to him in service, in faith, in generosity, then God will bless us even more abundantly. If we sow sparingly, we will reap sparingly. If we sow abundantly, were going to reap abundantly. But we need to make the choice. Hopefully we can all make choices in our giving based upon the big picture of eternity and what is ultimately important. God doesn't want us to feel pressured and pushed. He wants us to see that our giving is good for others, it's good for God's glory, and it's good for us as well! God loves a cheerful giver!