



November 11, 2007
Commitment Sunday

2 Corinthians 9:6-10

Enjoy Giving

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Jerusalem was in trouble. Jerusalem was *always* in trouble. The Apostle Paul was trying to collect an offering from the Gentile churches that he had started in order to give to the struggling church in Jerusalem. Apparently this was a hard sell in Corinth. Paul had been chairing this mission campaign for at least a year. The church in Macedonia had already given generously to this collection in spite of being poorer than the church in Corinth.

Giving just wasn't close to the heart of the Corinthians. From all of his writings, we get the sense that Paul loved the church in Corinth, but they were his problem child. They certainly had a hard time with things like love, giving, and commitment.

You have to wonder if the American Church isn't also a problem child for God. We are also loved and clearly blessed by God. But we, too, have a hard time with giving and loving commitment.

For some time, our society has been preoccupied with the individual. We are so worried about preserving our own rights, freedoms, and pursuit of happiness. This is not all bad. One of the great gifts of our society is that we honor the individual conscience, protect the right to dissent, and we abhor coercion in any form. We believe that individual freedoms are very important.

The Bible would agree that the freedom of the individual is important. But not so you can stay isolated, caring for yourself. No, the Bible claims the reason you have been made free is so you can choose to commit yourself to the things that matter. It is not freedom from, but freedom for, that our society finds confusing. As a result we may be free, but we are so lonely. We are clear about our rights but so confused about our purpose. No one lives a purposeful life without making commitments.

Many of our sociologists claim that our preoccupation with the individual is running out of steam, and people are looking for commitments again. Families may look different than they did fifty years ago, but people are still entering into committed relationships. Corporations are not moving their employees as often, and it's not uncommon to turn down a promotion for the sake of commitments to family. For some time, the rage in television shows is to portray healthy friendships. We certainly use our cell phones to stay in touch with each other throughout the day. And we're very committed to checking our email every day.

But the commitments people are making today are of a different kind than they used to be. Long gone are the days when an individual commits to anything distant or institutional. Now we want our commitments to be local, visible, and relational. And we want to feel good about this commitment. We want the commitment to do something for us – just like the Corinthians.

In his commentary on our text, Victor Furnish has claimed that Paul was challenging their Hellenistic devotion to the ideals of self-sufficiency and contentment. "Why give," they wondered, "if the giver didn't get something out of it?" And that is our expectation as well.

If your mailbox is like the one in our home, it has long been filled up with Christmas catalogues. And if you are like me, you at least thumb through their pages wondering what presents you will give to the people you love. This practice is expensive, but it isn't really hard to give to these relationships. We actually get a lot out of this kind of giving. We know these people well because they are a part of our lives. Giving to them is actually a way of giving to the life we have built together with them. There is certainly nothing wrong with this. It is a wonderful tradition. But it isn't exactly what Paul is asking of us today.

He's asking us to also make commitments to those we do not know. He's asking us to give to the global mission of Christ called the church. And to do it as a sign of our commitment to the God who has committed so much to us. That's much harder for us.

Like the Corinthians, we have lost our ability to make commitments to ideals, visions, and dreams. We used to be able to say, "This is what I believe in. I give myself to this cause." That is exactly what giving to the church is all about whether it is giving to a church in Jerusalem or in Pittsburgh. You don't make a pledge to a church for what you get out of it. You give because you're committed to the Gospel we proclaim in all that we do.

This weekend our nation is pausing to remember the sacrifice and dedication of its veterans. Why did they set aside their lives to serve the country in distant places? Not for what they got out of it. Not because they completely agree with their leader's policies and politics. No, they gave their lives to service because they believed in what the nation claims to believe. Veterans Day is important for the same reason Dr. King's birthday, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving are important. These days remind us of the ideals to which we have to remain committed to survive as a people.

That is similar to what Paul is trying to explain to the Corinthians and to us. The church lives or dies by our devotion to the Gospel of a God who is with us, healing, forgiving, leading us to the still waters of peace, and saving us by grace. That means that we give not only because of what the church does for us, but also because of what it does for them – those we do not know but who need our money for their relief.

From everything you know about our feisty Apostle Paul, who was not known for his sensitivity to people's feelings, you would think that he would chew out the Corinthian Church for their failure in being committed to the Gospel. But he doesn't do that. Instead he says: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind. Don't give reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." In other words, making a pledge to the church isn't something you have to do. It is something you get to do as a way of finding joy.

Let's return to those Christmas presents you are already thinking about getting for your loved ones. On Christmas morning when you are gathered by the tree and the wrapping paper and bows are scattered on the ground, your greatest joy will come not from the gifts you receive but from the delight you see on the faces of those who open your gifts. You give because you love, and you love because you are committed.

Paul is simply inviting us to have that same devotion in giving to our ideals, to the gospel that we believe can make a world of difference. We give not because we have to but because we get to and because we love the Gospel. We give because we are committed and have pledged ourselves to it. That is cheerful giving.

In calling us to give joyfully, Paul is trying to save us from anxious giving. The anxious giver hears about a need and frets: "I probably ought to do something. What will I get from this? Will that put my name in the 'Director's Circle'? Will I still have enough left for me?" God has little interest in this kind of giving. By contrast, the joyful giver hears about an opportunity for the Gospel to be strengthened and says, "Yes! This is who I am and what I stand for. Giving to it is what I get to do. Nothing could make me happier."

“The point is this:” Paul claims, “The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. The one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” You sow a committed pledge to the Gospel. You reap bountiful joy as you watch the delight of Jesus Christ unwrapping your gift. He will unwrap it within these walls through worship, education, and fellowship. He will unwrap it every time the sick and homebound are visited by a pastor or deacon. He will unwrap your gift in inner city ministries to the poor all over our community. He will unwrap it in distant fields of mission. And heaven and earth will come a bit closer together because of your commitment. Amen.