

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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October 18, 2009
Discipleship Series
2 Corinthians 8:9-15; 9:6-12

Giving, Like God

There's a spiritual disease which has been going around. It's endemic wherever there are humans. When it flares up, it causes worry, anxiety, and fear. It causes the breakup of marriages, stresses family relationships and friendships, and has been the undoing of countless businesses. The disease is called *philargyria*- the love of money, from the Greek *philia*, meaning "love" and *argyria*, meaning "silver" or "money."

I know that I'm susceptible to it. My immune system is particularly weak at bill-paying time or when I see what people have or do that I can't because they cost too much. When I wake up in the night worrying about how to finance college educations, or pay for a vacation, or save for retirement, I know it's got me in its grips. *Philargyria*—it really is a spiritual disease. Some people have different symptoms—they might use shopping like others use alcohol or food, to provide a momentary high after a disappointment or setback, and then call it "retail therapy." Others pursue careers or relationships which don't match their interests, except their interest in having a lot of money. But perhaps the worst symptom is when we measure our value as persons by what we earn or what we own. Wow, they earn a lot, they have a big house, a fancy car and they take expensive vacations—they must be important. But we're barely scraping by and our house needs repairs and our car is 10 years old. Our bank account tells you our value on the planet. (Thomas K. Tewell, "A Spreading Spiritual Virus," PC(USA) 1995 Stewardship materials, p. 15) It is a widespread, endemic spiritual disease. It's easier to recognize when someone else has it, but with a little soul-searching, I think almost everyone could detect it in themselves.

There's good news, however—this disease is treatable. Jesus had plenty of good advice for warding it off, for not letting our financial wealth interfere with our spiritual health. And I think it's also helpful to listen to the real life advice which Paul gave to the Corinthians, because, economically speaking, their city was more like the world we live in today than any other New Testament city. Their economy was built on commerce, not subsistence agriculture like much of the ancient world. The citizens of Corinth were considered wealthy because they had a money economy and they traded goods and services with people from all over the Mediterranean world. And that was true in the Christian community in Corinth, too. Even if they were only a generation or two removed from being slaves, their daily lives included money, coming and going. Like ours do. So when it came time for this church to participate in the offering for the poor in Jerusalem, Paul had to get real with them, not beat around the bush or speak in generalities, but talk straight about the spiritual implications of how they put their money to use. Surely he knew the challenges of *philargyria* in Corinth. He also knew the practices which guide disciples of Jesus, practices designed to keep *philargyria* at bay.

We've been talking about these marks of discipleship for nearly two months now. Our emphasis has been on six practices which disciples strive to keep. This little book called *Power Surge* by Michael W. Foss has been the kickoff point for our emphasis. One point which hit home for me when I read this book for the first time was that too often in churches we "under-communicate," that is, we don't want to bore people so we assume that if we've said it once, they've heard it. Well, at the risk of "over-communicating," in these

next six weeks we're going to preach again about the same six marks of discipleship we've preached about in the last six weeks, just switching around the order. Maybe you know them all by now—can you say them? Daily prayer, weekly worship, regular reading of the Bible, serving within and outside the church, being in relationships to encourage spiritual growth, and giving of your time, talents, and resources. Let me also say again something about the purpose of these marks of discipleship. They are NOT to earn points with God. They are also NOT to impress other people. They are means by which our discipleship, that is, our personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, can grow. We do these things because they are the foundation of a life which is faithful to God, following Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Daily prayer, weekly worship, regular Bible reading, service, spiritual friendships, and giving. We can work at these all our lives and we'll never fully "arrive." But if we don't work at them, we'll never get any farther than where we are now. These are foundational.

And the practice of giving is essential if we are to keep the spiritual disease of *philargyria* at bay.

Because when we give, we put our trust in God. When we give, we imitate a generous, giving God. When we give, we acknowledge with our actions that all that we have, all that we are, all that we can be is by God's grace—everything good is a gift from God.

Back to Paul's letter. The Corinthian Christians, like the Christians of other churches in other cities, had been enthusiastic about the offering for the church in Jerusalem when they first heard about it a year before. "Yes, of course, there is need in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem is the mother church, so of course we'll help out when the time comes." But with the passage of time, and maybe some other financial pressures, and a strained relationship with Paul, they had lost their zeal. But messengers were on their way to pick up the Corinthians' contributions. Would there be a respectable offering? Would they indeed do what they said they would?

Up in Macedonia the Thessalonians, Philippians and Bereans came through—in abundance. There was not nearly as much money in Macedonia as in Corinth, and Christians there were persecuted, too. But clearly there was faith, and commitment. Paul didn't mince words about this—the Macedonians had set the mark high. Could the Corinthians meet that mark?

He answered his own question. Yes, by the grace of God, they could. The Macedonians were generous because God's grace acting in them made them generous. The Corinthians could be generous by that same grace. All it would take was to know the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and be moved to follow his example. The key to this entire two-chapter fund-raising letter for the Jerusalem offering is chapter 8, verse 9: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Paul is not speaking of worldly wealth here. He is talking about the self-giving, pouring out, sacrifice of Christ to descend from comfort in heaven to live and die on earth for our sake, that we might ascend and live with him in heaven. This is grace, this generous act. All is grace. Ten times in these two chapters Paul uses the word *charis*, which is usually translated "grace." Trust, and give as our Lord has given.

With that reminder, he also gives practical advice. If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not what one does not have. The spirit of the gift matters more than the amount. It's about a fair balance, giving your fair share, based on what you have. Use your sense, the brain God gave you, to determine what's appropriate. Give cheerfully, not begrudgingly. And cheerfully, you'll be able to share in what your gift produces. The rewards of giving are manifold. What joy there is in being part of something bigger than yourself, better than yourself! And how much richer your life will be by giving, sharing out of God's abundance!

My friends, these words are words of grace given to us, too. They are words of healing and hope, for we do not need to be captive to the *philargyria* of our times any more than the Corinthians needed to be. The grace offered to us in Jesus Christ is sufficient for all our needs. I believe that. I trust that by following Christ I can be set free from fear that there will not be enough for me and my family. By following Christ with others, I trust that there will be enough for all. By living as generously and graciously as our Lord, and by practicing that grace by giving of the time, talents, and resources entrusted to our care by our generous God, we make our witness to the world on behalf of our giving God.

Not a "taking" God, but a giving God.

- A God who gives us life and health and daily food.
- Who gives us a beautiful world to live in and take care of.
- Who gives us the sun and the rain and all good gifts of the earth to sustain life, and the wonders of plants and animals, soil and air to share with others.
- Who gives us friends, and families, work to do, and time for play.
- Who gives us the joy of music, the delights of literature and the sciences, and the pleasures of art and dance and sport.
- Who gives us love, and bids us share.

And who gave his best by giving us his Son Jesus. A God who gives eternal salvation. This is the God we reflect when we are giving people.

Thanks be to God for the call to give, and for this community called church which holds out the healing power, the grace, of practicing generous giving.