

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Stewardship with Integrity, Part 1

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:10-12

Code: 47-60

We are blessed, believe me, to have what Paul at the beginning of 2 Corinthians called comfort, not only from the God of all comfort, but from the Scriptures which provide us comfort. The Scriptures teach us all we need to know about life.

I had a letter on my desk this morning from a doctor somewhere in another part of the United States, I didn't even look at the address. But he was saying that someone had...he was listening to me on the radio and he heard me talking about the Scripture and talking about how it prepared us for life and talking about how even in the darkest circumstances there could be comfort in the Word of God. And he questioned that. He said it just seemed incredulous to me that you could go through the darkest things of life, and he said you used some illustrations about that. And It just seemed to me unrealistic that you could find in the darkness of life answers from the Scripture that could comfort your heart in the worst circumstances. And then he said as if the Lord was going to put him to the test, they found out that their beautiful daughter who was a college student started to demonstrate some very serious illness and over a period of time it became apparent that she needed a liver transplant. Such a transplant was never forth coming and she died in her parents' arms just in the flower of her life. And he said it was then and only then that when he turned to the Word of God and began to listen to what the Scripture had to say to him that he found such tremendous comfort, such tremendous peace. And he said it prepared him for just a matter of a few weeks ago when it was told to them that their young son almost the same age as the daughter has the same illness and needs the same kind of transplant. And he in gratitude wrote a check and sent it to the ministry here to thank us for ministering the Word of God to him and finding strength in it for the very, very darkest times in life.

Well the Scripture is everything it promises to be. It provides everything we need for every issue in life. It is immensely and profoundly practical as well. Sometimes when we teach the Word of God on a Sunday, it's pretty deep theology. In fact, we got into it pretty heavily when we were here in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and verse 9. I suppose we dug as deeply into that as any one verse in this epistle, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich yet for your sake He became poor that you through His poverty might become rich." It's kind of reminiscent of 2 Corinthians 5:21, that great verse, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Those are deeply theological verses and they make you grapple with some very, very serious doctrinal issues and they tax your mental capacities. And the Bible does that. It presents us with some mysteries, some theological mysteries which are incomprehensible and scrutible and in some ways unsolvable.

But then on the other hand, there are some parts of the Scripture that are just very plain, very simple, very straightforward, very non-theological, very practical and that's the kind of one we have before us this morning. In fact, in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 you'll want to turn your Bible there, we're going to start at verse 10 and we're going to take verse 10 all the way down through chapter 9 verse 5 as one unit. Now obviously we're not going to cover all of that this morning, but it's a very, very simple, very practical portion of Scripture. And it's about this continuing thought of money and giving in the church. Chapter 8, chapter 9, both of these chapters address the subject of giving, stewardship in the church.

But I want to take this section from verse 10 of chapter 8 down through verse 5 of chapter 9 and call it "Stewardship with Integrity." When I talk about stewardship I mean the whole idea of giving to spiritual causes, the whole idea of funding kingdom enterprises, the whole idea of investing in eternity, the whole idea of giving to the church in order that the church might carry out its ministry, in order that it might meet the needs of its people as well. And we're spending these two chapters talking about giving. We've talked about a couple of different aspects of it already, but now we're going to talk about stewardship with integrity. What does stewardship that has integrity look like? What does a giving plan or program or emphasis with real biblical integrity look like? And here is the instruction, I think, that helps us to answer that question.

Now, of course, many people think that any talk about money, or any talk about giving or offerings or contributions or fund raising is unacceptable and intrusive and even offensive. And I'm sure there are people who have gone to church and because they were not interested in the things of God have commented later on...Well, all they ever did was ask for money. We have certainly heard that time and time again. And we're very aware of that. I suppose there are those people who think that any time you ask for money it is offensive. The church has often been criticized by unbelievers and sometimes by believers as well for being constantly before the people asking for money. We're very sensitive to that. We know about all the con-men, all the pitch men, all the hucksters, all the religious frauds and charlatans who in their schemes to build their own empires and pad their own pockets and gain great wealth have pursued courses without ethics, certainly trying to accomplish their own goals and not the goals of God. And they have bilked endless millions of people through the years and continue to do so even today.

We've all seen religious leaders, quote/unquote, who have become rich at the expense of poorer people giving them their money. Particularly are aware today that all of the...all of the demographic studies indicate that most of the money given to national media ministries comes from people who have middle or low income, much of it from people who are on a pension. People getting rich at the expense of those who have very little. We are aware of extravagant and wasteful spending campaigns on grandiose and garish buildings and facilities. We are all sensitive to that. We have all faced the high pressure tactics, we all know what it is to read the slick kind of stuff, the come ons, the

gimmicks that try to get our money basically through manipulation of some sort or another.

And when all of that is said and done, and look, I am just as turned off by that as you are, when all that is said and done, when all that is bad and unbiblical has run its course and received its just criticism, that does not change the fact that God has designed giving as a crucial central element in the expression of our Christian lives according to His will. It is a means of advancing His Kingdom. It is a means of glorifying His name. It is a means of meeting needs. And it is a means of laying aside treasure in eternity and it is a means of receiving blessing even in this life. Giving is a very central matter. In fact, Jesus Himself said it is more blessed to give than receive. When you receive you receive what men give you. When you give you receive in return what God gives you.

Nothing is wrong with a church asking for money. Nothing is wrong with a church collecting money from its people. Some churches get so paranoid about this that they don't even take offerings, they don't even receive collections. Sometimes they just expect people to mail it in. Other times they'll put a box at the back of the room. Personally I believe that giving is a high priority and a very, very important part of expressing worship to God, and it belongs in a central place in the life of the church even as it comes together on the Lord's day. Now we're commanded to give for the purposes of the Lord's work that it might be carried on. So the issue of giving, the whole area of stewardship is to be conducted in the church but it is to be conducted biblically and it is to be conducted with integrity. It is to be done, like everything else in the church, to the glory of God.

Now as we come to this most practical and frankly most personal section of 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9, Paul demonstrates to us essential principles for stewardship with integrity. If we're going to have a stewardship program that has real integrity, it has to have these principles. And as I was reading through this, in all honesty it was a very, very difficult portion of Scripture for me to put into a package. It wasn't difficult for me to understand, it was difficult for me once I understood it to translate it into some kind of sermonic form so I could package it in some way to give it to you. And as we go through it, you'll see the simplicity of it and the simplicity of it on the surface belies the complexity of trying to package this thing. And as I began to think it through, it probably took me about three weeks before I sort of landed on how to thematically tie it together. It became apparent to me that the principles that come out of here indirectly help formulate for us what a sound stewardship campaign with integrity should look like.

Now remember, both chapters 8 and 9 are about giving. And the particular project that Paul is concerned about is collecting money from Gentile churches to take to the Jerusalem church because the Jewish church there in Jerusalem is extremely poor and they don't have subsistence...food, clothing and shelter. And the Gentile churches are much more prosperous and so he wants them to share what they have with the poor in Jerusalem. This enterprise Paul was engaged in for quite a length of time, at least a period of a year and it could be as much as two years, wandering around a Gentile world making every effort to take collections from various churches to relieve the terrible

poverty of the Jerusalem church. And the poverty there is, as I remind you, was due to the fact that many of the Christians there were pilgrims who came in on Pentecost. God saved and stayed and had no livelihood. And the Jews who came to Christ, of course, were persecuted by their society, lost their jobs, their opportunity to earn and so therefore there was an impoverished condition in the church.

This enterprise gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity then for Paul to write some very instructive material here on stewardship. And if you were just to start reading in verse 10 and keep reading, you might get the feeling that this is all sort of personal and sort of irrelevant and sort of redundant, but it isn't. It has some tremendous things to say to us.

Now remember, in the first eight verses we pointed out that giving is the behavior of devout Christians, as illustrated by the Macedonians' giving. In verse 9 we pointed out that giving is Christlike. And now starting in verse 10 he wants to show us the principles of a stewardship with integrity. And it's a very, very practical section. There's nothing like this section in the Bible. It is a very unusual section. It is uniquely personal, uniquely practical, and very helpful as we will see going through it. And we can measure and you should do this, we can measure all future appeals that come to us, all future church or parachurch ministry stewardship campaigns by the principles given here. They are that complete. And we'll begin to look at them this morning.

Stewardship programs with integrity have several elements. Here's element number one, element number one, stewardship with integrity calls for giving that is voluntary. Stewardship with integrity calls for giving that is voluntary. And we have noted this all the way along that free-will giving, that is giving from the heart to the Lord, is purely a voluntary issue. As to how much you give, that's between you and the Lord. It is voluntary. There is no commandment about a percentage. It's not a tenth, as we clearly pointed out. The Old Testament tithe was taxation and actually every year a Jew had to pay two tithes, that's twenty percent, every third year a third tithe so that would break down to three and a third per year, so twenty-three and a third plus a half shekel temple tax, the gleanings that fell off the wagon when he harvested the field, the corners of the field all had to be left for profit-sharing with the poor. The fact of the matter is they were paying probably around twenty-five percent a year taxation to fund the national government which was a theocracy, run, of course, by the priests. But there was no percentage on free-will giving. You pay your taxes, yes, but when it comes to giving to God, that's something you have to decide in your own heart as to amount or percentage. So it is important to keep in mind that any stewardship campaign with integrity calls for giving that is voluntary.

Look at verse 10, "And I give my opinion in this matter, for this is not to your advantage...pardon me...for this is to your advantage who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this but also to desire to do it." In general what he is saying here is I'm not commanding any specific amount, it's completely up to you, just know this, it is to your advantage. This is all about how much you want to

receive. And you can go down to chapter 9 and look at verse 8, and we'll get to that...or verse 7 rather, and we'll get...no, verse 6, it's actually all three, but we'll look at verse 6, "He who sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully." You want a small harvest, give a little. You want a large harvest, give a lot. Luke 6:38, "Give and it shall be given unto you, pressed down, shaken together and running over."

So Paul is saying here, "I give my opinion in this matter." He is not commanding. Giving is important. Giving is essential. Giving is commanded. But as to amount, that's completely up to you. He is saying what is wise and what is appropriate is to give. How much you give depends on your own heart attitude before the Lord. But remember this, I'm giving you my opinion in this matter for this is to your advantage. It is to your advantage to give, that is the issue. How much advantage would you like? How much would you want the Lord to bless? How much treasure you want to lay aside in heaven to which you will receive an eternal reward? How many friends do you want to purchase for eternity...in the language of Luke 16...how much do you want God to return to you when you sow? It's to your advantage. The spiritual blessing is yours.

And that's what we've been emphasizing all the way through this whole series...giving is voluntary. Free-will giving has always been voluntary, whether you're talking about before Moses, during the time of the Mosaic Law, or in the New Testament time, giving is always voluntary, there is no percentage, there is no legal requirement, there is no set amount and there is no demand. And in any stewardship that has integrity, there is no compulsion. You need to mark that. There is no compulsion, there is no confiscation, there is no reallocation of wealth. There is no redistribution. But only an appeal to voluntary giving.

And I just would point up by way of a brief illustration. We have seen some very, very tragic things occur in the name of sort of evangelical fundamental Christianity in the last few years. The latest of which is the David Koresh tragedy where many people died in the terrible fire that occurred down there in Texas, and not many years ago prior to that was the death of hundreds of people in the James Jones fiasco down in a northern part of South America. In both cases what you had was strong demagoguery at the top of that situation, a man whom people believed to be the spokesman for God to whom they yielded up all their property, all their wealth, everything they possessed and they entered into some kind of a communistic kind of agenda where all the resources of everybody were shared equally at the discretion of the leader. And, of course, he was the beneficiary of most of it. It was a redistribution, it was a reallocation, it was, in effect, by manipulation of the mind a confiscation of things that belonged to people by compulsion that is never ever a ministry of integrity. That is never a stewardship campaign of integrity. There is only one way that that can occur and that is when gifts are completely voluntary. No manipulation, no compulsion, no confiscation, no reallocation, no redistribution, but an appeal to people's hearts to give whatever they want.

And by the way, that is not always the way the church has conducted its stewardship programs. There are churches even to this day that assign certain amounts to people and demand that those amounts be paid. There is a strong pressure in many churches that people pay ten percent of their income to the church and they are demanded to do that. In some cases disciplined even if they do not do that. Fixed amounts are sometimes required but none of that is biblical. Believers are to give voluntarily so that it is to their advantage. It's purely how you want to be blessed. It's a question that you have to answer in your own heart. God will respond to your giving by being generous. The question is how much generosity from God would you like?

Specifically in the case of the Corinthians, Paul makes no special demand. He does not require an amount. He does not require a percent. He does not require them to take money from people who have it or to tax them or assess them in some way. That is not done. He just reminds them that they must give with regard to how much advantage they want.

And then he reminds them, look at it in verse 10, "Certainly, he said, it's to your advantage who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this but also to desire to do it." Now we're right back in touch with this whole deal again. The issue is you were the first to start when this thing first came up, you were the first to give to the needy in Jerusalem to help the church. You were the first to do it. And you were also the first to...what?...desire to do it. It came from the heart. You were the first to begin a year ago. Literally, it could be translated, and either one is possible, it could be translated, "Last year...last year." It could have been that he meant a year ago, it could have meant that he meant last year which could even stretch it beyond a year. Sometime last year, depending on where he was in the current year. It could stretch as far as over twenty months, obviously.

So who were the first to begin a year ago? The Corinthians. They were the first to start this and they had a desire to do it. That's how giving should be done. It is that which you desire to do and you do it in response to a heart's desire, knowing it is to your advantage. And that's why Paul says, "All I can do is give my opinion." As he said back in verse 8, "I'm not speaking this as a command."

Now this is a good place to give you a little bit of a review of the historical flow. And I'm going to get this by you real quick, so listen carefully. Let me tell you when he says this last year or a year ago how it all started. Paul came to Corinth on his second missionary trip. And God used him to found the church there, that's all recorded in Acts 18, okay? He came to Corinth, the city there, and he founded the church. God used him mightily to do that. He continued to minister in that church for eighteen months. Again you can read all about that in Acts 18. Jewish opposition, however, as it often did, usually did, began to escalate and it marks out at the end of that eighteen month period the Jewish opposition was getting pretty furious. Paul stayed a little while longer and so we have suggested around twenty months and then left for Ephesus...which would take him east to Ephesus.

From Ephesus some time later, not exactly sure precisely when, he sent a letter to Corinth. He sent it with Titus. The letter is the first letter he wrote, it is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9, it is not 1 Corinthians, there was another letter. It was not inspired by God but I'm sure it was instructive. It was a corrective letter. He had gone to Ephesus and already heard there were problems in the church and so he sent this first letter with Titus, his young son in the faith. And apparently at that time when Titus went there with that first letter, Paul had already begun to put the plan together to collect money from Gentile churches for the Jerusalem saints, and so Titus informed them about that. And they responded that very first time by requesting some money for them for the Jerusalem church, remember Paul was trying to harmonize the two churches, the Jew and Gentile, bring them together as well as relieve the poor. And the Corinthians responded.

But they had some questions. And so apparently when Titus came back they sent a letter back with him, or at least they sent word back with him about these questions that they had. And there were a number of these questions and they are addressed in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians, the second actual letter that he wrote. But it addresses their questions. And one of the questions was about giving. That's why in 1 Corinthians 16 he says, "Concerning the collection for the saints," and then he goes on to explain...which implies that they had some questions about it. How are we to do it? How are we to collect it? How much is it to be? And whatever.

So when Titus came back he came back with questions, they had begun to give toward the project, they had some questions with regard to the project, so Paul answers those when he writes 1 Corinthians. And he answers a lot of other issues as well. First Corinthians was written from Ephesus.

Sometime after that Paul made a visit to Corinth. He became aware of the false apostles there. He had a confrontation there when one of the rebellious members of the church stood up and spoke shamefully to his face and the church never dealt with the man at all. They never defended Paul at all. They never disciplined the man at all. And that broke Paul's heart and that really was indicative of a mutiny that was starting in the church and that mutiny was against the Apostle Paul. It was orchestrated by false apostles because they wanted to teach lies, but in order to teach lies they had to get rid of the reigning teacher who was Paul, so they began a character assassination and the church bought into it.

Well, Paul left. And when he left he wrote another letter. This letter is called "the severe letter." He gave this one to Titus, sent Titus with this one. This would be letter number three. It confronted the false teachers. It confronted the false apostles. It confronted the mutiny and the rebellion. Titus took that letter.

Prior to the writing of 2 Corinthians which was the fourth letter, Paul was waiting and waiting and waiting, remember, for Titus to come back to give him a report. Titus finally returned from delivering

that third letter and the report was good. They had responded. They reaffirmed their love. They want you to be your leader. They affirm that you are the Apostle. They restored the relationship. Paul was so thrilled. And then he wrote 2 Corinthians. He wrote 2 Corinthians primarily to defend himself because he knew that there was still rumblings of assault against him. Even though things were smoothed over, he was concerned that there might be some...still some sparks that could ignite another fire. So he sent 2 Corinthians back with Titus again.

Now poor Titus is making a lot of trips to Corinth. And it's a long arduous hard trip. But he goes back with 2 Corinthians. And in 2 Corinthians right here in this section the whole issue of their involvement in the offering comes up. And he says to them in verse 10, "You were the first to begin a year ago, or last year, not only to do this but also to desire to do it." From the beginning it was from the heart. And that's how all giving is to be done if it is to honor the Lord. It must be from the heart. And when he instructed them even in 1 Corinthians 16 he said, "On the first day of every week let every one of you put aside and save as he may prosper." That's all, no amount, no percent. You just put aside according to what you have. Always voluntary. Give whatever you want. It is not obligatory. It is not to be done grudgingly because you've been commanded to do a certain amount.

So the first principle then in carrying out stewardship with integrity according to God's plan is to urge people to give voluntarily for their own blessing out of the desire of their own heart. Plain and simple. And whenever somebody gets you into a situation where you are being manipulated, where you are being somehow intimidated into giving, where you are being commanded as to amounts and percentages and all of that, that lacks the character of biblical stewardship.

Principle number two, stewardship with integrity calls for faithfulness to complete the project...faithfulness to complete the project. Following up verse 10 in verse 11 Paul says, "But now finish doing it also that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it." And we'll stop right there.

Paul says you have to finish what you start. All the good initial intentions mean very little if they don't complete the collection. So he says very straightforward, "But now finish doing it also." The first to be willing should not be the last to perform. You remember Jesus said in Luke 9:62, "No one after putting his hand to the plow is...and looking back is fit for the kingdom?" And that's why in verse 2 which I just read to you of 1 Corinthians 16 he says, "Everyone of you, every Sunday...the first day of the week...give to this project so that when I get there we don't have to take some panic collection." It should be done systematically, regularly and brought to completion.

Now, you say, "Well what stalled the thing? I mean, they started out doing it, what stalled it?" Well, somebody might say natural apathy...just...they just put it on the back shelf, just got disinterested in it. Somebody might say they were slackened off by distractions, other issues arose, other matters concerned them. And having been Christians now for a little while maybe they lost a little of that first

love and they wanted to put some money back into some things that sort of made life more comfortable. And that was what they would have otherwise given to the kingdom. They were increasingly being distanced from initial impulses. And, you know, you hear people say if you want to have your people continue to give you have to keep whipping them up, you have to keep reminding them because they so soon forget. And there's certainly truth in that. But most likely while those sort of natural tendencies are reality and must be faced, it is far more likely that they had stopped their process because they had been influenced by the false apostles' attack on Paul because one of the things that they said about Paul was that he was in the ministry for the money. They said you cannot trust the man. He is a deceiver. In fact, he refers to their accusations in chapter 4 verse 2 as walking in craftiness and adulterating the Word of God.

In other words, he was a deceiver and a con man and a crook. Back in chapter 2 verse 17 he says he is not a peddler of the Word of God, a con man, a huckster, a charlatan, a fraud. That's what that word kapelos(?) means. It referred to the guy in the marketplace who ran the shell game and took your money.

So the fact that Paul had been assaulted as to his integrity with regard to money no doubt cooled the whole thing because they would be worried that he would somehow be padding his own pockets and their expense. But now since Titus has gone and Titus has told them the truth about Paul and the relationship has been restored and the confidence is back, it's time now to finish the project. Now is the time to finish the collection. You do it by giving regularly every single week...putting it aside so that when I come it will all be there.

Now you say, "Well how much were they trying to get?" As much as all of them were willing to give, that's all. There was no set amount for individuals, how could there be a set amount in the total at the end. You have to have the Lord sort of orchestrate that. But it was going to be a lot. Paul was not going to settle for a little bit. It was supposed to be a very, very large offering and in this very text he talks about it as an abundance. He talks about it as a very large offering. And we'll get into this. Verse 20 refers to it as a generous gift. So they were pursuing a very large amount of money for these dear folks in Jerusalem and for the sake of the church. And in the truest sense, really, they were giving it to the Lord.

So it was most likely the hostility of the false teachers that took the edge off. But Paul says to them in verse 11, "Just as there was the readiness to desire it," never apostolic pressure even at the start, it was from you heart, "so there may be also the completion of it." Finish it. I suppose anybody in leadership in the church would say one of the hardest burdens to bear in the ministry is to deal with good beginnings that never finish. That's how it is. I can't tell you how many people I have worked with in my life who could start strong and finish weak, who could have a great beginning and a lousy ending. It's not easy to keep things all the way through to the finish, it's a matter of discipline and devotion and dedication. It's a matter of depth of commitment. I thank the Lord in our church that

through the years you dear people and many others before you that have since moved on to some other places, some of them even to glory, have continued from the start to the finish, and that's why God has so abundantly blessed our church. I wish it could be that way all the time in every place where God's work is being done, that what was started would be finished, would be completed.

Sometimes people get weary. Sometimes they get disillusioned. Sometimes they get distracted by other things. But nothing...listen...nothing debilitates the systematic giving of people, nothing takes the heart out of going all the way from the start to the finish as a loss of confidence in leadership. When people lose confidence in leadership they have a very difficult time with their giving. You can just see it because it shows up on the offerings...whether leadership has failed or not, if they perceive leadership has, it affects their giving. And that's no doubt what happened in Corinth and once the leadership trust was restored, it wasn't Paul's fault, it was those who came in and tore up their confidence in Paul. And, beloved, that can happen. It has happened here and I can think back a few years when assaults were being made on the leadership of this church unrelated to truth. It showed up immediately in a plunge in giving and it wasn't until it was restored that the giving came back. There was nothing true about accusations that were being made, they just were being made and people for whatever reason bought into them. But Paul says...Look, there's no reason, you don't need to lose confidence in me and you need to finish what you start.

I love finishers. I love finishers. I love somebody who finishes strong. And that's even a prayer in my own heart and my own life for my own ministry. Stewardship with integrity then is voluntary, from the heart and faithful to the finish. Sees the project all the way to the end. Completes the commitment of the heart. Sees that it's accomplished. The point is this, if you believe that it was the purpose of God, that it was the will of God and you showed that at the beginning, it is still the will of God at the end and you ought to show the same kind of commitment. See it to the finish.

Thirdly, stewardship with integrity calls for amounts that are proportionate to what one has. It calls for amounts that are proportionate to what one has. Look at the end of verse 11, last three words. He says I want you to complete it by your ability, literally out of what you have, or according to your means. Or you want to borrow the language of 1 Corinthians 16:2, "As God has prospered you." Very simple, giving is proportionate. We saw that back in verse 3, "I testify the Macedonians gave according to their ability and beyond their ability and again they gave of their own accord." That is they gave voluntarily. And they gave proportionately.

And the next verse strengthens that emphasis. Look at verse 12. "For if the readiness is present," the word readiness means an eager disposition or a willing mind, willingness, eagerness. If the willingness is present it is acceptable to God according to what a man has, not according to what he doesn't have. God's not asking you to give what you don't have. That's why there aren't any amounts. That's why there aren't any percents. God is just saying whatever you have is the resource out of which you give. Don't go into debt. Don't spend what you don't have. Don't pledge what you

don't have. That's why I don't like credit card donations. That's very popular today. Churches even do that. And some people are giving money that isn't even theirs. God doesn't expect that. What God is concerned about is the readiness, the willingness. See what it says in verse 12, if the readiness is present, it's acceptable. All God is really after is the heart attitude. That's it. And beyond that according to what a man has not according to what he doesn't have. Simply put, God never asks more than your present resources permit.

Even the Macedonians who gave according to their ability and beyond their ability could only give what they had. And what that verse means is God isn't asking you to give beyond your ability, which is another way of saying they gave more than you ever could have imagined people in their condition giving. God is not asking you to impoverish yourself. The Macedonians did that. They had an unusual grace from God to do that. But God is not asking you to give beyond your ability. You may choose to do that. You may choose to stricture your life in some way because your heart is so given over to the purposes that have been brought before you, the growth of the kingdom and the church. You may choose to do that. God is just saying all I ask is that you give according to what you have.

The Macedonians, as I said, though they gave an unusually large amount for people so poor, could still only give what they had. It may have come down to them having to eat two meals a day, or rice or whatever else there was of a staple character, bread. God is not asking that we reduce our life to that. He honors the Macedonians for that kind of sacrifice. But God asks you to give out of what you have not according to what you don't have. God is not unreasonable. He asks no fixed amount, no percent. He doesn't ask you to impoverish yourself. He doesn't say you need to give your last red cent to me. Just give what you're able to give.

Now you certainly want to follow the lead of the Macedonians and when your heart is deeply moved you may give more than anybody would assume you should give. You may be like that sweet woman in the twelfth chapter of Mark and verse 41, we remember her. Jesus sat down in the treasury, watched the people give. A poor widow came, put in two small copper coins which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury for they put in out of their surplus, she out of her poverty put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

You know what it was? One day's earnings which meant she didn't eat that day. She fasted that day and had to wait to get the two copper coins the next day to buy some food. It may be that God puts it on your heart to give like that, not to starve yourself to death but for a day or a few days to restrict your life or to say no to a luxury. But God is reasonable and God asks you to give out of what you have.

There's also the implication there that if you have a lot he expects you to give a lot. You give according to what your resources are. If you have minimal resources, you can only give a little. If

you have maximum resources, you can give a lot. It may have been that some of the Corinthians were making excuses as to why they weren't giving, saying they didn't have sufficient resources, saying they had good intentions a year ago but economic things had changed and they were able to raise an appropriate amount. And the Apostle Paul says God does not expect you to give what you don't have. But He does expect you to give out of what you have. And if you have a lot, your gift should reflect it, give what you can. With God it is never the amount that is the issue, it is the heart. No gift is too small when it comes from one who has little. A gift is small if it's small and it comes from someone who has a lot. God judges the disposition according to the resources available. No place for high pressure. No place for unreasonable manipulation whatsoever.

So often, you know, we hear about these poor widows and people on pensions manipulated into giving to some preachers and their programs out of intimidation and guilt, promises of healing, promises of health, wealth and prosperity. And they give beyond what they should because they've been manipulated. That's not biblical.

All right, stewardship with integrity demands giving that is voluntary from the heart, that is faithful to the finish, and that is proportionate. Time's up, how about that. It's the first time I looked...is that right? That is right. We've got to get a new clock, one that runs slower.

Well I told you this is pretty practical stuff. And you know, I think I have eleven points so you have three of them so you can sort of measure how long we're going to be here in this passage. We'll try to cover a little more next time. Let's bow in prayer.

Well, Father, we just want to hear what Your Word has to say and follow the pattern in our own lives and we ask, Lord, that You will continue to instruct us in regard to this matter of giving. It would have been enough if You had said give because it's right, give because I command you. It would have been enough if You had said give because souls need to be reached, the gospel needs to be preached, missionaries need to go, people need help. It would have been enough to say give because it humbles you, it divests you of some of what you have and causes you to live closer to faith. All of those would have been enough but then You said give because if you do I'll bless you, I'll give back to you pressed down, shaken together, running over. I'll give not only in time but in eternity. Father, what goodness, what loving kindness, what grace and what mercy on Your part.

Father, we do want to follow a stewardship program that is biblical. We want to be faithful. We thank You for so many in this church who indeed have done that, for all the years that You've led us through the development of our church and the building of all of our facilities and the missionaries and the ministries that have gone across the face of the earth. We thank You, Lord, for all of that and it's all because of Your working in the hearts of Your people who responded. Lord, help us to know that all You ask is a readiness of heart and a willing gift. All You ask is that we be faithful to finish what we start and not waver and vacillate.

Lord, we do desire to be strong to the end. And, Lord, You have also said all I ask is what you have, give from what you have. If the heart is right, that's acceptable, just give according to what you have. And those of us who have little, it is acceptable if we give our best. Those who have much, it is acceptable if we give according to what we have. That's what You ask. Much more to come, Lord, and we pray that You'll continue to instruct us in Christ's name. Amen.

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