

The Art of Giving Well

by Robert L. Hubbard

A *USA TODAY* POLL ASKED PEOPLE TO FINISH THE LINE, “I’D GIVE MORE, BUT ...” The results explained why people don’t give more time and money:

- 84 percent said they doubted their donation would be put to good use.
- 80 percent said job demands left them no time to participate.
- 79 percent said they had no excess income to give.
- 70 percent said family commitments consumed their extra time.

Most of us have similar thoughts. But suppose no one gave? There would be no neighborhood sports teams for kids, no parades on holidays, and no summer band concerts in the park. There would be no blood banks to supply hospitals and not enough hospitals for everyone. There would be no Salvation Army or rescue missions to help the needy and no shelters to escape winter’s cold. No Christian radio stations would play inspiring music, and no churches would exist. Without money, none would be built, and without paid workers, none would function. There would be no missionaries to carry the gospel. Without volunteers, who would go, and who would send them? People would die without knowing Jesus. But the real question is: What does God want? What does His Word teach us about giving?

BACK TO BASICS

Several basic truths undergird the Bible’s view of giving. *First, we are stewards, not owners, of our possessions.* Psalm 24:1 proclaims, “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.” God owns everything because God made everything. The title papers that say I own my house are misleading. God made both the materials and the laborers, so He owns the house.

Second, *God generously gives things away.* When my house was built, the suppliers charged the builders for its materials, but God didn’t charge anything for what He supplied. All that, God has given us free. His life throbs in us, and we breathe His air day and night. We use His land, and His birds sing sweet concerts daily. Across the sky His clouds dance ballet, and He paints nightly sunsets and starlight shows, all for free. God models the generosity we are to imitate. If the owner is generous, how can we, His stewards, do less? Our task is to use what He gives us in ways that please Him.

Finally, *the reason we work is to have something to give*. Paul commanded Christian thieves in Ephesus to stop stealing and get a useful job to “have something to share with those in need” (Eph. 4:28). Part of our earnings meet our needs, but Paul expects the rest to meet those of others.

TWO BIBLICAL CASE STUDIES

Acts 4:32-37 describes how early Christians in Jerusalem lived. They showed Godlike generosity: “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had” (v. 32). For example, Joseph (better known as Barnabas) sold some property and gave the money to the apostles to distribute to the needy (vv. 36-37). Others did the same (vv. 34-35), and amazingly the church had “no needy persons among them” (v. 34).

Their generosity met the needs of every Christian in Jerusalem. This case teaches us the first biblical principle of giving: *Christians share what they have to meet others’ needs*.

We find a second case study in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Apparently, Christians in Jerusalem could no longer meet their needs. So during his travels Paul collected money for them from Gentile Christians (Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 9:2-5). Although poor and persecuted, the Macedonians had given generously (2 Cor. 8:2-5), and Paul writes the Corinthians to ask them for the gift they had already promised (v. 11).

Several principles for “giving well” emerge. First, *Christian generosity includes giving to believers in other countries and cultures*. Paul asked Gentiles in Greece to give to Jews in Palestine. Their location or race were unimportant; what mattered was that they were fellow Christians.

Second, *Christians are to strive for excellence in giving*. Paul says, “Just as you excel in everything ... see that you also excel in this grace of giving” (v. 7). He ranks generosity with faith, knowledge, sincerity, and love. We are to excel in those qualities, as well as in giving, not settle for some minimum standard.

Third, *we are to give voluntarily and cheerfully*: “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 Cor. 9:7). Rather than manipulate or shame the Corinthians, Paul lets them decide whether to give. He banks on their maturity and integrity.

Fourth, *we can decide how much to give*. Paul teaches us to give according to our ability (2 Cor. 8:12). The amount is a matter between us and our Lord. We are to give from the surplus we have after meeting our own needs.

Fifth, *Paul teaches that God repays us in kind*: “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (9:6).

Finally, *the more one gives, the more one has to give away*: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion” (v. 11). As a friend known for generosity explained, “I shovel out, and God shovels in ... and God has a bigger shovel.”

OK, BUT WHAT ABOUT...

Two questions arise. First, *what are our “basic needs” and “surplus”*? In the Bible, one’s “basic needs” appear to be food, clothing, and shelter. Jesus taught that our heavenly Father faithfully feeds and clothes us just as He feeds birds and dresses lilies (Matt. 6:26-32; see also 1 Tim. 6:7-8).

God does not promise to make us middle class. While there’s nothing excessive with wanting to have a nice house, new car, three meals a day, and full cable service, these are not biblical “needs.” The kingdom of God and the middle class are not the same thing. He blesses some of His people with wealth; still, He guarantees only that we’ll have food and clothing.

The surplus is the remainder after we subtract our expenses for basic needs from our total income. Most of us probably spend the majority of the surplus on things our culture calls “needs.” Our challenge is to cut back on meeting those “needs” so more of the surplus can meet biblical needs.

Second, *what about tithing — the giving of a tenth of one’s income*? Here the New Testament surprises us: It mentions but doesn’t teach tithing (Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42; 18:12; Heb. 7). The Old Testament commanded it (Exod. 23:10; Deut. 14:22-23), and Jews in Jesus’ day tithed (Luke 11:42), as do many Christians today.

The New Testament’s silence on tithing raises serious questions. If early Christians tithed, wouldn’t the New Testament teach it somewhere? Also, why do most passages picture it negatively (Matt. 23:23; Luke 18:12)? Did the apostles think it too legalistic or unfair to the poor? I still practice and commend tithing as a good basic practice. But Acts 4 and 2 Corinthians 8-9 emphasize other things.

Generosity aims to meet basic needs and expresses joyous gratitude to God. Giving springs not from obligation, but from simple Christian maturity. Such maturity doesn’t need material things to be happy. It views them as gifts of God to be given away — cheerfully!

GIVING: THE UN-AMERICAN ART

Does all this sound strange? It should. It's so different from the way the world runs. As Christians, we're to treat people differently — cheerfully, generously. But how can we?

Step one is to swallow some un-pleasant facts: *We're greedy*. We come by our greed naturally ... we're born that way. So we must un-learn greed and re-learn generosity from God.

Also, *we're rich*. On a recent short visit in Togo, West Africa, I saw poverty close up. Most of the world lives like Togo, not like North America. The West has 15 percent of the world's population but 90 percent of its wealth. That makes us the rich whom God expects to help the poor. This truth goes down hard. We feel we're barely making it. But most of us must swallow this truth.

The tax code shouldn't guide our giving. It's fine to take legal tax deductions for our giving. Still, some gifts that please God may not please the Internal Revenue Service. For example, you might give money or goods directly to a needy friend rather than through a charity. Always give "as unto the Lord," not "according to the IRS."

Similarly, *beware of the temptation to give just to lower your taxes*. Giving by tax code may disguise selfishness; it can make the tax code, rather than God, the guide to our giving.

Finally, *accept your limitations*. No one can do everything, but we each can do a little good somewhere. That idea sets aside my discouragement at the overwhelming needs in the world and frees me to give.

HAVING LESS, GIVING MORE

Our biggest problem is freeing up a biblical surplus. Our money gets tied up in culture-driven "wants" beyond our basic needs. The culture preaches self-indulgence and consumption. But God speaks of "humble self-sacrifice" and "cheerful generosity." He honors service and stewardship, not consumption. Our challenge is to free up a biblical surplus for God's use. One way is to move down, not up, in lifestyle, to live below our income so we can give more away. If we have nothing to share, a lifestyle change is in order.

Evaluate two items our culture promotes: our house and our car. Do we need the year, size, and model of car we have? Would something smaller and less expensive suffice? Suppose you're shopping for a newer car. (I prefer "newer" to "new" because it avoids unnecessary expense). Why not buy a newer car, but a less expensive model? The lesser-model principle also applies to other purchases. But remember the goal is not simply saving, but saving in order to invest in God's work.

Ron Sider suggests another means of freeing income, the *graduated tithe*. The idea is to increase one's giving each year by one percent. After many years of doing this, one of my former colleagues and his wife now "tithe" more than 30 percent. The graduated tithe requires

us to trust God's provision and to evaluate our spending carefully. It may even surprise us how little we miss that extra one percent each year — and how much more God blesses us for giving it.

“I'd give more, but ...” generated excuses in the survey. We all face enormous cultural pressures to buy and consume. But the Bible's mandate is clear: to give generously and cheerfully, just as God has treated us. Our task is to treat others the same way.

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