

Thanks & Giving: Thankful Giving
By Jason Huff
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Malachi 1:6-14; Luke 6:27-36; 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

[Paul writes to the Corinthians,] “There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we -- not to say anything about you -- would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 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. As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 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. 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. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Why do we give stuff away? Americans gave \$335 billion dollars to charity last year. That’s mind-boggling! The US consistently ranks first or second on the World Giving Index, and it gives us some interesting surprises. Religious Americans give away 2.2% of their earnings each year, and a third of all charitable donations go to religious organizations. Folks in Utah declare the most charitable donations on their tax returns. 77% of Americans say they have helped a stranger in the last year.

Statistics still don’t answer why. Some people give because it makes them feel good. Others give because they feel they should, that God wants them to, or to impress others. We give due for emotions and tax write-offs both. Sometimes we give to stop getting hounded to give, only to find more requests in our mailboxes! Sometimes it’s a mix of all of these things.

But Christians have different reasons to give than the rest of the world. Most of the time, churches appeal to their members for help because we need it...which we do. We appeal with similar methods as secular charities. But Jesus’ teaching in Luke and Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians show that Christian giving is meant to be driven by very different motives.

We hate to talk about giving because we don't want to offend people, so we rarely dig in deep. But today we're going to do that. Last week, we saw beautiful paradoxes in thankful worship. There are beautiful paradoxes in thankful giving, too, that bring us joy when we come to God with the right attitude. Let's take a look at them as we find them in today's Scriptures.

Paradox #1 of Christian giving – Thankful givers expect nothing and everything all at the same time. In Luke's gospel, Jesus teaches His disciples not to hold anything back in their giving and not to expect a return of what they've given, even as a loan. Jesus says if they've ripped off your coat, don't stop them from taking the shirt off your back too! In Matthew, Jesus says, go the second mile. A Roman soldier could make someone carry his belongings one mile; Jesus said to go further, to show love. There was no reward in it; Jesus just said to do it.

Jesus said not even to expect praise for giving, that we're supposed to give with our right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing...if possible, our giving is to be secret even from ourselves! Jesus never said to expect a tax write-off or a thank you note from the church elders or something named after us. In fact, He said that if we gave in such a way that we'd get praise from others for our giving, that would be the last reward we'd ever see for that gift!

We expect nothing – no rewards, no payback, no praise. Yet at the same time, we expect everything...everything we need to do what God asks and far, far more. We Christians can give more of ourselves than anybody else because God has given us salvation – eternal life with Him. Our time here is an insignificant blip, a blink of an eye, in comparison with the eternity to come. We can give up anything here because we have everything, forever, still coming! If we were to live in a hovel somewhere with a dirt floor and a thatch roof and had to scrape out every meal the rest of our days on earth, we would still be blessed to have eternity ahead of us.

Yet God gives us so much more here and now, and we can expect it! Not just wish or hope it, but expect it, because our Father is like that! Paul encouraged the Corinthians, "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." "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion." It is not *may* abound, *may* be rich, *might* be, *could* be. It's *will* be!

When we aren't abounding in God's gifts as deeply thankful givers, it's usually because of two things – our expectations are too low and our desires are too low. It's false modesty to say, "I don't want to bother God. He's too busy with other things." Our expectations of God are too low! Many of you here are parents. I would never want one of my boys to suffer through something because he doesn't think I care enough to ask me, or that I'm too busy to help him with whatever he's going through. Why would God feel differently?

God loves to give good gifts to His children; Matthew 7 and Luke 11 says if we who are evil give good gifts to our children, how much will the loving and good and perfect God give good gifts to those who ask Him! It's wrong *not* to ask God to provide! Jesus says it, Paul says it, we see it over and over in Scripture. Don't let your expectations of God be low! Set the bar far higher than you expect and see how God exceeds even that!

The second thing that stops us is that our desires are too low. We talked about this a bit when we finished up the Ten Commandments – that what we want is often less than God’s best for us. If there isn’t the promised abundance – which Paul tells us to expect – something else is wrong. Usually, it has to do with desires that aren’t in line with God’s desires. Faithful givers desire God and God’s glory and His will to be done.

Let’s look again at what Paul says. “God is able to make all grace about in you *so that*...having all you need, you will abound in good work...you will be made rich in every way *so that* you can be generous on every occasion.” God’s blessings are poured out on us for a purpose. It’s not, “you will have abundant grace so you can own a new house” or “You will be made rich so you can put in an in-ground swimming pool.” God’s gifts are given in order for us to give them away.

We all like little pleasures in life, and we like our big pleasures even more. But thankful givers see the raise at work, the business opportunity, the surprise inheritance, all as ways to further God’s Kingdom. This isn’t a guilt issue; God gives us pleasure in little things. Jesus took pleasure in fish dinners and a glass of wine and a foot bath. He made those pleasures! But how puny are our pleasures if we enjoy a meal out or a movie more than ushering people into the Kingdom, providing for Kingdom workers, providing clean water and a roof so others can see the goodness of God in our gifts to them. Expect more of God – and expect your desires to grow into God’s desires rather than your own – and you will experience thankful giving.

Here’s the second paradox of Christian giving – thankful givers give cheerfully to those to whom it is hardest to give anything. Jesus isn’t impressed by giving to those who love us. He’s not interested in reserving His miracles only for those who appreciate Him. Last week, we heard in the readings how Jesus healed ten lepers and only one – a Samaritan foreigner – came back to thank Him. Jesus’ response was not to hold back. He never said, “No more miracles for you!” He keeps on healing, keeps on loving, keeps on giving to people who aren’t satisfied. It is His very nature to give, even to those who will never appreciate just what He is doing for them.

Loving the unlovable was a reality for the early church. Just because Jesus taught believers to love and sent them the Holy Spirit to counsel them didn’t mean that loving those people they had once hated was easy. Israel was the hardest territory for the Roman Empire to control because they were xenophobic. They thought those outside the faith were unclean; as the Bible states, “The Jews had no dealings with Samaritans,” and they were their distant relatives, more like them than anybody else in the world! God had to send signs, dreams, and visions to Peter and the other apostles before they accepted Samaritans and Romans as followers of Jesus.

This kind of “inside/outside” thinking is very common today. My friend Hugh’s a Methodist preacher down in Georgia. The other day, he was accosted at the Dollar General for filling Operation Christmas Child boxes! They complained that people “right here” were more important than those half a world away. Hugh said, “How do you know I’m not helping local people too?” The gal apparently was so shocked she just walked off!

It is hard for us to give to people who don't say thank you, who take advantage of us, who take our gifts and never put them to good use. But Scripture reminds us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We didn't do anything to deserve it. Our salvation is not a matter of our choice but God's mercy. Why did we come to live in this place and time and come to faith in Jesus? It's because of God and God alone. In Romans 9:16, Paul writes that salvation "does not...depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

So we're merciful to everyone who comes. We give them a turkey and groceries; we help as God enables us. We do it joyously because God blesses us to spend eternity with Him. What's \$50 for groceries or \$30 for a shoebox? What's a few hundred a month to the church in comparison to the blessings God showers upon us and will keep pouring out into eternity? Thankful givers give to those it's hard to love because we were impossible to love in our sin, and God sent His Son to us so that we could be made lovable. In that light, it's not so hard.

Third and final Christian giving paradox - thankful givers don't rejoice when they are praised, but when God is praised for the generous service they have performed. Bill Gates and George Soros and Warren Buffett have given huge sums of cash to different charities. Maybe they feel they should give back. In some cases, they have a social agenda they want to promote. But it's not anonymous. People like to be known as philanthropists.

But Christians aren't worried about applause. We want God to be glorified. We live for His glory. We are God's conduit. God accomplishes His will through us. We're blessed that God would choose us to be the means by which He saves His children and brings them into the Kingdom. The thanks don't belong to us. We aren't naturally generous; the gifts we give were gifts to us from God. We give credit to God because that's where credit belongs.

Yet just for being willing to be God's conduit, we *do* receive credit. Paul says that not only will those who receive gifts from us give God praise, they will pray with us in mind. As he says it, "in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you." It's true from personal experience. When we've received gifts that have kept us afloat, we've never forgotten. I forget a lot of things, but those folks are dear to us.

We don't receive credit, but we receive joy. We receive prayers. We receive God's rewards in all sorts of ways. We get the peace of knowing we have done what's right by God. And it's fun to give knowing that you're building God's Kingdom! It's amazing when you write a check you know you could never write on your own that God has made possible for you to give. It's like the Grinch when his heart grew three sizes in one day. Give for God's glory just because you love Him and desire His will, and there's nothing like it. You may not know it, but when you give like that, you will be in the hearts of others because you said "yes" to God's call.

In our final few minutes together today, let's put this into real practice. We've learned the paradoxes – that we can give without expecting anything, to those we'd never expect, without getting the credit, knowing God's blessings, knowing God has given salvation to us in our own unlikableness, and knowing that God will hear prayers for us when others pray in thanksgiving for what we've let God do through us. How can we get to the place of experiencing these realities?

Two things. *First, let's redefine generosity.* The average American gives 1.7% of their wealth away, much of which is stuff they don't want any more, and think they're generous. We think we're generous with a 20% tip for someone who's waited on us. It's a joke! The ancient Jews thought the same thing when they sacrificed the worst of their herds to God. They were generous, right? In Malachi today, God says no. God says if the governor they'd try to impress wouldn't approve, why should He? It's not generous to give begrudgingly or to give leftovers.

The dictionary defines generosity as lavish, extravagant, abundant giving. How much of our giving is lavish? God's gift to us goes beyond time itself – that's lavish! Lavish doesn't fully define godly generosity. According to Scripture, generous giving is giving first. It's the best. Godly generosity doesn't hold back out of fear. That's what stops us from giving the way God gives. Is God going to take care of us? If so, then giving is never a problem. For us to do our giving up right, lavishly, extravagantly, it's got to be out of love, not obligation. God loves a cheerful giver, Paul says.

We've seen generosity at CrossWay in our Thanksgiving baskets and our Operation Christmas Child boxes. It's fantastic! So here's my challenge to you – don't be content with that. Shock yourself with your generosity. Hold nothing back. Give so that you could say in all honesty, "I never knew I could be so generous!" Don't give what you think you can give. Give beyond what you know you can give. Give so that God shows up. Sometimes, people ask me, "How do you know that God is real?" Beyond faith, beyond belief, I know that God is real because of those times – too few, to be honest – where I've asked God for something far more than I could accomplish or give or know. He shows up. God will show His abundance to you when you trust He is there and step out in faith relying on Him to show up.

Second, repurpose your whole life towards giving, not just your wallet. We tend to think of giving as being about stuff. We give away money, food, clothing, and appliances – stuff. But for Christians, giving is a lifestyle that encompasses every part of us. I've heard it divided into three parts – time, talents, and treasures. That formula must have been devised by a guy, because we guys think in boxes. We have a time box and a talent box and a treasure box in our minds and we put them back into place when we're done. Women tend to be more integrated – you all can multi-task like nobody's business! Our giving needs each component to come together. We need the whole package. Most giving is weak because we miss 2/3rds of what we could be giving. You could give tons of cash and still not be an integrated giver.

Some of you are generous financially – that's how CrossWay has made it this far. Some of you lend your talents to the church, and some your time. I'm blessed by you who make bulletins and hook up the church with local businesses. It's great when somebody comes up with a fantastic idea. But we can step it up. You have talents that will make CrossWay tons more effective for the Kingdom. Your time will make certain our bulletins look great and people are greeted and more folks know about CrossWay. What time and talents can you share? Let me know so we can get you giving. If we don't, we miss out on the blessings God made you to give, and you miss out on the blessings God intends you to experience through your giving.

CrossWay needs your generosity to succeed. Paul was confident that the Corinthians were going to give just as they had promised, but he sent them this reminder so that they wouldn't be unprepared and he wouldn't be ashamed for boasting in their generosity. All of us want to hear at the end of our lives, "Well done, good and faithful servant," from Jesus. CrossWay's destiny is largely in our hands, whether or not we will give ourselves to our mission as a body of believers. God has already equipped us to start, and He will provide more as we trust Him and give more. Let's not be found wanting and ashamed because we refused to make the most of the gifts God has given us. Let's give our best, our all, and then approach God in confidence and joy, knowing His blessings will always overflow.