

2 Corinthians 9.6–15

How much can I give?

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Sunday 26 November 2017

A generous life (3)

God owns all the doughnuts

Show the J John video: 'God owns all the doughnuts'

Having watched this video again last week, I am regretting not basing this entire series around doughnuts! Perhaps it is easier for us to think about giving and generosity, if instead of talking about money, we talk about doughnuts.

Recap

As I'm sure most of you have noticed by now, during November we have been thinking about what it means and looks like to live 'A generous life'.

We began by thinking about our vision as a church to 'Follow Jesus Together', and how important it is that we are a healthy church.

Then we looked at how faith is shown, not by going but by coming back to Jesus and giving thanks to him.

Last week we looked at the importance of giving in secret, to help guard against impure motives.

¶ We have looked at ‘Six Steps of Christian Giving’, which are described in more detail on flyers at the back of church if you missed it. The questions are: which step are we on now, and which step is God calling us to?

¶ We have seen how Christian giving is not about fundraising or giving to charity, but *faithraising*: giving in response and thanks for all God has given us. As J John put it: *God owns all the doughnuts...* he isn’t stealing ours, but *sharing his doughnuts with us*.

¶ We have heard about what *true* treasure is, that the reward God gives is far more than wealth, but the reward of a generous and godly life, lived not for ourselves, but for God and for others. We heard about how opening our hands and letting go opens us up to receive the wonderful grace God lavishes on his people.

Today we were going to look at two things: *how* and *what* can I give? But, as I’ve been unwell this week, we’ll focus on the second question: what can I give (or, how do I know how much to give)?

Tithing?

Throughout the Law in the Old Testament the Israelites were commanded to give 10% of their seeds, fruit and flocks as ‘first fruit’ tithes to God. They were also commanded to give a tenth to the Levites to support the work of the Temple and the priests – who in turn gave a tenth to the chief priest.

But then in the New Testament, although Jesus talks positively about tithing, he is talking to his contemporaries about what they do, not commanding it to his disciples. Nowhere in the New Testament are the laws about tithing repeated to Christians.

Also, we might argue that some of the tithes were the equivalent of National Insurance, supporting Israel’s version of a welfare state. (They did also pay taxes to the king back then as well, though.)

Generosity

Instead of repeating the Old Testament’s laws about tithing, Paul effectively replaces the entire system with one word: *generosity*. In our passage this morning he uses it five times.

Look at v6 with me §:

Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

2 Corinthians 9.6 (NIV)

Paul uses a farming metaphor which is pretty hard to argue with: the more seeds you plant, the more plants will grow.

I once tried to re-sow a patch of grass. I scattered a few seeds on the ground, watered it a bit, and left it. What happened? Zip all.

In the spring I re-sowed a patch of grass in the vicarage field (I've stopped calling it a garden) – this time I listened to some advice. I dug it over, scattered some seed, spread some top soil, scattered some more seed, spread some more top soil, scattered even more seed, spread even more top soil, scattered yet more seed, spread yet more top soil – and then threw the rest of the seed on for good measure. The result? No more patch of soil.

Christian giving is not about tithing, it is about generosity.

Give it away

Now, I know that some people don't like Paul's letters – but here Paul is simply teasing out the implications of Jesus' teaching **J**:

Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.'


Mark 8.34-35 (NIV)

This is, quite literally, a *crucial* teaching for us.

Becoming someone who follows and learns from Jesus – a disciple – is easy: Jesus paid the ransom, he suffered the punishment, he conquered sin and death – all in our place, and all so we don't have to. Not only that, but Jesus offers the reward *he* earned, to us, as a free gift of love. Hallelujah! This is the solid foundation of the Christian life, and it can never be shaken or taken away.

Being a disciple is costly. We cannot simply carry on as before – that would be to mock God's love and Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus calls us to a life of daily and life-long self-sacrifice. But it's worth it.

Think about it like this.

Becoming a disciple is like being given a  bag of doughnuts by God. It's easy. You don't have to do anything except say thank you and take the bag of doughnuts.

Being a disciple is like sharing that bag of doughnuts with others, not hoarding them all for ourselves.

Jesus teaches that when we try and grab on to the little we have, one day we will lose it and we'll have nothing. But if we let go of what we have, and open ourselves to God, we will receive treasure that lasts forever – true treasure, far beyond wealth and possessions.

Jesus also said ,

‘Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.’

Luke 12.15 (NIV)

Friends, life is more than a bag of doughnuts. If we learn that lesson and give them away, we'll discover what true treasure truly is – the blessings and rewards Paul talks about in this passage.

Paul says **¶**,

You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

2 Corinthians 9.11 (NIV)

Some of us will be blessed financially by God. Some of us won't. But focusing on that completely misses the point. All that God gives us, he gives *so that we can give it away*. God owns all the doughnuts.

OK, I'll stop talking about doughnuts now.

The point is this: the more we give away, the more God will enrich us **in every way**, that is the reward of a godly and faithful character, a generous, grateful – and therefore *content* – heart. This is the treasure that lasts.

It's not that by giving generously we *buy* this treasure from God, but that as we let go of our money and possessions – things that are only temporary anyway – so we open ourselves up to receive the true treasure from God – the treasure that lasts.

How much?

¶ Finally then, the nitty-gritty: how much?

If we are released from the strict rules about *what* we should give – no more 10% of this and 10% of that – the question remains: how much do we give?

Paul's answer is this ¶:

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

2 Corinthians 9.7 (NIV)

Christian giving is not a tithe. It is not to be compelled by law, or wrung out reluctantly.

A strong man at a circus was demonstrating his strength by taking a green stick and squeezing some sap out of it. When he had squeezed a few drops, he asked if anyone from the audience would like to try. A frail-looking little old lady came forward, took the stick in both hands, and squeezed. A stream of sap ran down over her knuckles. Amazed, the strong man asked, 'Who are you, lady?' She replied, 'Oh, I'm just the treasurer from the local church.'

That is not what Christian giving is, and it is not what this sermon series has been about. If I haven't managed to get that message across yet, please hear it today: Christian giving is not about fundraising, it is about *faithraising*. Christian giving is a love gift, a thank you present, given cheerfully, with a song in your heart.

Are you **a cheerful giver**? If not, it doesn't mean God doesn't love you, but it does mean something isn't right with your giving, and you need to reflect on that. Friends, *Christian giving brings joy*! It brings joy to others, and it brings joy to you, because Christian giving comes from a heart **overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God** (12) for the **indescribable gift** (15) that God has given us in Jesus.

There is much more I could say on this topic, but I'll stop here.

Instead, this right here is what I'm asking us to do over the next few weeks. You will all receive a letter soon, summarising some of the practical details about *how* you can give to the church, and giving you the opportunity to make a fresh commitment to God at the start of 2018. That's for then – *today* I am asking you to do what Paul encouraged the Christians in Corinth to do: think carefully and prayerfully about how many of God's doughnuts *you* want to give back to God (!).