

What Is God-Centered Generosity?

Jonathan Parnell

 OCTAVO



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Published by Cities Church
1524 Summit Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55105

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Cover design: Volente Creative Industries, LLC
Typesetting: Volente Creative Industries, LLC
First printing 2022
Printed in the United States of America

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Preface

Dear Church,

In Genesis 4, in the “course of time,” Cain and Abel — two humans — brought an offering to God. To God. *GOD!*

In other words, these creatures are *giving something* to the God who we know doesn’t need anything.

How do we know God doesn’t need anything?

Because just a few chapters previously, in Genesis 1, we read that God spoke all of creation into existence.

Everything there is exists because of God, clearly, and yet Cain and Abel intend to give God something from what he has made! It should seem strange to us, but nevertheless that’s what these brothers do. They give to God ... and God receives Abel’s gift.

There is more to the story, but we learn, at the very least, that our giving matters to God. Our giving matters not because God needs anything from us — *he certainly doesn’t* — but because what we give is closely tied to our hearts, and it’s our hearts that God cares about most.

Our giving is an expression of something deeper about ourselves and what we think about God.

We learn that we can't worship God in truth if we have hearts with a white-knuckled grip on "our stuff," whether it's our sheep or our crops or our bank accounts. It doesn't make sense that we would come to God any other way than fully surrendered, hands opened, trusting that he really is who he has revealed himself to be.

This is basic to the life of faith, though it's not easy. Jesus understands that we might have some reluctance here, and he kindly addresses it in Matthew 6, getting to the heart of the matter, which is the focus of Chapter 1 in this booklet. Matthew 6 serves as the foundation for how we should think about giving. The apostle Paul, I'm convinced, builds upon that foundation in 2 Corinthians 9, which is the focus of Chapter 2.

The chapters in this booklet are abridged versions of two sermons I preached in the Spring of 2021, but the truths of God's word are timeless, so I think you'll find the content relevant and — I pray, if God be pleased — helpful.

In that way, this booklet targets one of my repeated prayers for our church over the last couple years: that God would create in us a culture of generosity — cheerful generosity rooted in the God-centeredness of true giving.

"For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

With joy,
Pastor Jonathan

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Getting to the Heart of Giving

Matthew 6:19–34:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

²⁴ “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. ²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than

clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

We need to address the elephant in the room.

An "elephant in the room" is quite the figure of speech, isn't it? Seriously imagine for a moment that an elephant is standing in the same room you are. Wherever you are right now reading these words, imagine that within the same confined space of four walls, you are joined by an elephant — large, loud, and perhaps odorous. He is right there, and you can't not see him. That's the point of the figure of speech. If there's an elephant in the room then it's silly to talk about anything else until you acknowledge the elephant — because that's all people are going to be thinking about anyway.

Because it's an elephant in the room!

Here's the elephant in our room: this is a booklet about giving, *and most people do not give.*

That's not particularly the case for our church, but it has become a fact about Americans in general. All the studies over the last 20 years show this. The average American gives less than 2% of their income to charitable organizations. And of the less than 2% that Americans give, less than 40% of that goes to religious institutions like churches. *But that's just about Americans*, you might say. *What about Christians?* Well, according to the same studies, the average Protestant Christian in America gives the same as the average American: *two percent.*

It's always worth noting that such studies and surveys are fraught with potential errors. *Are all people who claim to be Christians actually Christians?* That's doubtful. *Do many true Christians who give fly under the radar of such studies?* Of course. We must take such studies with a grain of salt, but by and large their claims are borne out. In light of all the money possessed by those who claim to believe the Bible, the amount given is dismally small. Our church's track record of generosity is a wonderful anomaly.

This brings up the important question of why. *Why don't more Christians give more money to God?*

The goal of the next few pages is to answer that question, and then to consider the remedy that Jesus gives us.

Why Don't More Christians Give More?

Jesus answers our question in Matthew 6, which becomes clear when we understand the connection between verses

19–24 and verses 25–34. I'll try to capture Jesus's answer in one clear sentence, but I want us to work our way to the answer together, beginning in Matthew 6:19–20.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Verses 19–20)

Jesus is talking about money, and it's one of his most reasonable teachings in all the Gospels. He gives us a negative-positive imperative. He states something *not to do*, and then something *to do*.

First, what *not to do*. This is the negative, in verse 19: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.”

Second, what *to do*. This is the positive, verse 20: “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

Jesus could not be clearer:

Verse 19: Do *not* lay up treasures on earth.

Verse 20: Do lay up treasures in heaven.

Now why does Jesus say this? *Why should we not lay up treasures on earth? Why should we lay up treasures in heaven?*

Contrary to what we might think at first glance, the reason Jesus says this is not because of what moths and rust and thieves do. When Jesus mentions those three things in verses 19 and 20, he doesn't state them as *reasons*, but as *characteristics*. These three things *characterize* what's on

the earth. On earth, moths eat clothes; rust exists; thievery happens. But in heaven, none of those things happen. Now, in terms of a basic risk-assessment, you might conclude that it makes more sense to invest your treasure in heaven than on earth. The logic of what Jesus says points us this way, but that's still not his main point. The main point comes in verse 21 when Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." That's his reason for *why* you should not lay up treasures on earth.

And to be clear, in these verses the word "treasure" is not an exact correlation to our money. It's more like what we do with our money. Our treasure is what our money acquires. It's our financial investments, or how our money might accrue over time — *that* becomes the place of your devotion and love, Jesus says. *That* is where your heart will be.

Which is why healthy discipleship *must talk about money*. Jesus teaches us that money and our hearts are closely connected, and therefore if we're going to *follow Jesus* and we *care* about one another's hearts, we must talk about money and its use. If we never talk about money, that's a sign of immaturity, and it's time to grow up.

One day I hope to have a conversation with someone new to Cities Church that starts, "Pastor, I'm new here and I've noticed that at this church you guys often talk about money."

I'd reply joyfully, "You're right, and isn't that great? We really want to follow Jesus and we really care about one another's hearts!"

Of course, we believe this and I'd say that because Jesus tells us plainly that *where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also*. And if all your treasure is "earthly treasure" that means it will get eaten and rusty and stolen — because that happens

on this earth — *and when that happens to your treasure what will that mean for your heart?* That's what Jesus is getting to.

Well, we assume that if your treasure gets rusty, and your treasure is where your heart is, then your heart must get rusty too. If your treasure gets eaten away at, little by little, then your heart must get eaten too...until it shrinks to hardly nothing at all. And if your heart does that, everything else in your life is going to go sideways too.

That's what verses 22-23 are getting at when Jesus talks about the eye and the body:

"The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, ²³ but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Verses 22-23)

The eye has an important guiding function for the rest of our bodies. Our eyes are meant to show us where to go, but if they malfunction, if they're blinded, then we can't see. It means darkness, and when it's dark we can't see where to go. In the same way, the heart steers the person, *and treasure steers the heart.*

Jesus makes it all very plain in verse 24:

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." (Verse 24)

Jesus is saying that money, like God, is a master, and a servant cannot serve two masters. "You cannot serve God

and money” — or as the King James puts it, *mammon*. “You cannot serve God and *mammon*.” Now that’s a great word we don’t use everyday.

Mammon is the transliteration of a Hebrew word, and it’s an important concept because it means more than just money. It includes money, but also possessions and assets and the whole deal. *That altogether is a master*. It is a god all on its own. And you cannot serve that god and the true God, because the true God deserves and demands exclusive allegiance. You have to choose.

This is how Jesus teaches us about money. And it’s clear, isn’t it? This is not an obscure passage. Many of us have read these verses before, and it seems, based upon what Jesus says here and his reasoning, that 10 out of 10 followers of Jesus are going to say, *Hey, okay, yes, I choose God. I will serve God, not money!*

But does that mean we will give him less than 2% of our income?

The Anxiety Behind Greed

It’s important that we see in this passage that Jesus isn’t done with his teaching. Look at verse 25:

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

And notice especially that verse 25 comes after what Jesus says about money in verses 19–24. I think that’s because I think Jesus is anticipating an honest question. People hear (and read) this teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6, that you

cannot serve God and money, and they wonder,

But wait a minute — if I don't serve money, then how will I make it in this world? Because I have to have money.

Money is used to take care of me. Money gets me what I need and more.

Just practically, I don't know what I would do if money is not my master.

And Jesus anticipates that natural concern and says, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious..." Jesus says, *You cannot serve God and money, and do not be anxious about not having the things you think money gets you.*

Do you see it? Jesus teaches us not to serve money, and then he tells us not to be anxious. *Could it be that anxiety is the real cause of greed?*

Of course it is.

We are anxious that we won't have enough. The thinking goes, "If I give money *there*, I might not have money for *this* or *that...or that...or that.*" And it keeps going.

Remember, the original question is *Why don't more Christians give more money to God?*

Based upon Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6, the one-sentence answer is that more Christians don't give more money to God because we're anxious that if we do, it will make us miserable.

That is precisely the anxiety Jesus addresses in verses 25–34. It's the anxiety that we won't have enough to eat, that we won't have enough to drink, that we won't have clothes

to wear. And to be in the predicament of lacking those things is to *be miserable*. Nobody wants to be miserable. That is our anxiety. And so that's why we relate to money the way we do.

Two Kinds of Misery

If we drill down into the topic of anxiety, seeing that we are anxious over potential misery, then we are left to consider what kind of misery this is.

In this passage, Jesus directly addresses one kind of misery — *the misery of our needs not being met* — but there is also another kind of misery worth our attention. We try to avoid both kinds of misery with our use of money.

The first kind is the misery of lack, which is what Jesus addresses head-on in the passage. The other kind of misery, though, is the misery of boredom. If the misery of lack says "I have nothing to eat," the misery of boredom says "I have nothing to do."

The misery of lack drives our fear that we will not have enough, *and so we keep back*. The misery of boredom drives our desire for abundance, *and so we spend more*.

There are those who might lack and those who might get bored, those who keep back and those who spend more, those who save and those who shop (to use more respectable words) — both can be efforts not to be miserable, both can come from a place of anxiety, *and both leave no room for giving*.

Do you see it?

To *give* is to neither keep nor spend. To *give* is to neither save

nor shop. And that can make us anxious, because if we *give* that money, we don't have that money to keep or spend, and that means we might be miserable, and *there* is where our anxiety originates.

We all know this. We feel this. And it's not to say that we don't ever keep or spend — of course we do — but if we keep and spend from anxiety, and therefore do not give, Jesus is talking to us in these verses. And his words to us are not about giving, they're about anxiety.

Jesus is concerned with our hearts. He tells us,

Don't be anxious! Look at the birds of the air! They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

The Remedy to Our Anxiety

Do you know that God cares about you more than he cares about the birds?

That is how Jesus confronts our anxiety. *He reminds us about the Father's love.*

To be completely honest with you, if you're part of Cities Church I don't ultimately care whether you give your money to our church or not, but I do care about you not giving your money because you don't think God will take care of you. That anxiety is the bigger issue here, and like Jesus, that is our target. May I remind you what Jesus tells us?

The remedy to our anxiety is to remember the Father's care for us, which Jesus states in three facts.

First, you are valuable to God. (Verse 26)

Altogether, this is the point Jesus is making:

God always takes care of the birds;

God values you more than the birds;

therefore, it's implied, God will always take care of you.

It's simple to see the whole of what Jesus teaches here, but I don't want us to rush past the minor premise that *you are valuable to God*. Because of his love for you, through your faith in Jesus, as a son or daughter of God, *God is your Father, and his posture toward you is love*.

It's not a coincidence that in the Sermon on the Mount, here in Matthew 6, Jesus repeatedly calls God "your Father." *God is our father!* And it's *our Father* who feeds the birds — and nothing against birds, but he's *our Father!* We matter more to him!

Growing up, one of my pastors used to preach a sermon called "The Birds Are Still Singing." It's a profound sermon because he takes what Jesus says here — "Look at the birds" — and he says, basically, that the reason birds exist is to remind us of God's care for us, and therefore, every time you hear a bird sing, you should receive it as a reminder that God cares for you.

It is a brilliant assertion, because guess what? Birds are singing all the time, somewhere. They sing because God takes care of them, and *you are more valuable than they are*.

Second, your heavenly Father knows all your needs.(Verse 32)

This is the reason we should not be anxious about what we're going to eat and drink and wear. The Gentiles, the nations, *those without a heavenly Father*, they seek after all those things, but you — *us!* — *we have a heavenly Father*, and our heavenly Father knows that we need them all.

Jesus told us this earlier in Matthew 6. He says in chapter 6, verse 8, *not to pray like the Gentiles (who think they will be heard for their many words). Don't be like them*, Jesus says, because "your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

I understand this is hard for adults to grasp, because a big part of being an adult is that you have to think about things that, as a child, you didn't have to think about. When I look at my younger kids, I realize they don't have to think about anything. What they eat or drink or wear — it never crosses their minds. *You know why?* Because it's on the mind of their mom and dad.

Can you imagine yourself as a child under the care of your heavenly Father? Can you imagine that what you need is on his mind? And that what you need tomorrow is on his mind today? He's our Father. He knows.

Third, your heavenly Father will supply all these things. (Verse 33)

Matthew 6:33 is an amazing promise. I remember my dad teaching me this verse when I was a kid — "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and *all these things will be added to you.*"

This promise goes back to verse 24 and the statement that no one can serve two masters. Serve God, seek God, put God first and his kingdom and his way, and all these things we are prone to be anxious about, *God will provide them*. The apostle Paul repeats this promise to us in Philippians 4:19–20:

And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Don't be anxious, because God is your heavenly Father and he cares for you.

The Paradigm Shift on Giving

So we bring a question, and in Matthew 6 we find an answer and remedy.

Question: Why don't more Christians give more money to God?

Answer: Because we are anxious that if we do, it will make us miserable.

Remedy: Remember that God is our heavenly Father and he cares for us.

When we really understand this, it will change the way we think about giving because it will cause us to "look up."

When it comes to giving, so often we "look down." We think about giving in terms of what difference the giving will make for us, and therefore we have our anxieties and hesitations. *But what if we thought first about God?*

What if we thought about our giving from the perspective of our heavenly Father who cares for us? What if we thought

about giving in the context of that father-child relationship, and we knew that through our giving we can actually bring delight to the heart of our Father?

This paradigm shift in our thinking is the topic of the next chapter, but the foundation comes in Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6. *God is our Father and he cares for us.*

2

The God-Centered Paradigm Shift

2 Corinthians 9:6–15:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰ He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service,

they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

In the previous chapter we looked closely at the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 6, and we saw that money and our hearts are closely connected, and that the biggest hurdle to our giving is the anxiety that our giving — *instead of our keeping back or spending more* — will make us miserable. We saw that Jesus confronts that anxiety by reminding us that God is our heavenly Father and he cares for us. And when we understand all of this, as Jesus teaches us, it changes the way we think about giving. Jesus leads us to look up and to think about giving from God's perspective, which creates a God-centered paradigm shift.

Three Transforming Truths of a God-Centered Paradigm Shift

Next to Jesus's teaching in Matthew 6, the apostle Paul's instructions in 2 Corinthians 9 are the most direct teaching on financial giving in the Bible. He shows us that it is possible, and best, for us to think about *what God thinks* when it comes to our giving. This kind of looking up, this God-centered paradigm shift, includes three transforming truths.

1. God accepts acceptable offerings.

Now this might sound simple, but my hope is that we understand afresh how amazing this first truth is. The fact that we, as creatures, can give something to God, the

Creator, and that he would receive it, is mind-boggling. Because *God is God*.

As the Scriptures testify, we believe in one living, sovereign, and all-glorious God, eternally existing in three infinitely excellent Persons: God the Father, fountain of all being; God the Son, eternally begotten, not made, without beginning, being of one essence with the Father; and God the Holy Spirit, proceeding in the full, divine essence, as a Person, eternally from the Father and the Son.

We worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. Yahweh, God's declared name, is the triune God, fully and completely God. And to be fully and completely God *is different from being human*. There is a vast, unimaginable difference between being God and being us, between being the Creator and being created. In God's holiness, and in his unlike-us-ness, one fundamental difference from us is that he *never needs anything*. Never.

Acts 17:24:

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.

God is absolutely *independent*, and everything else is dependent upon him. Like Job says, "In [God's] hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind" (Job 12:10). Or like God himself says in Job chapter 41 (which Paul quotes in Romans):

Who has given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is

under the whole heaven is mine. (Job 41:11)

Paul adds, “*From him and through him and to him are all things.*” And if we attempt to relate to God as if that’s not true, it’s repulsive to him. God says in Psalm 50:

“I will not accept a bull from your house or goats from your folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry [*which he is not, nor ever will be, but even if he was, just for example, he says*] I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.”

God does not need anything. *He doesn’t need us.*

And yet we open the Bible, and right away in Genesis 4, in one of the earliest interactions between God and man, and the first scene of worship, we read about two brothers who *give something to God.*

These two brothers, Cain and Abel, bring an offering to God. *Why do they do this?*

We don’t really know. There are no laws requiring them to do this. According to what’s revealed in the Scriptures at this point, God had not commanded them to do this. And yet here they are, “in the course of time,” *bringing* something to God (see Genesis 4:3). They are bringing something to the same God who, just three chapters before, created everything that exists by his words. He literally spoke everything into existence, and now these brothers are going to *give him* something of what he spoke.

How does this make sense? It is almost comical, except that God *receives* the gifts. Genesis 4:4:

And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

We read verse 4 and, if we're honest, it raises a question for us. And the question it raises betrays how man-centered we are. If you're like me, you read Genesis 4:4 and immediately wonder, "Why did God not regard Cain's offering?"

Really, though? The right question is "Why *did* God regard Abel's?"

Why does this God, *who just made everything and doesn't need anything* – why does he receive Abel's gift?

How is it that there is such a thing as an acceptable offering to a God who is all-sufficient and unchanging?

We, as in you and me – we can give to *HIM* and he *reacts in favor*? That's what the word "regard" or "accept" means. Another way to capture the idea is to say that we can please God by our giving.

And the only reason such a thing exists is because God, in his unchanging nature, is gracious and merciful and he has a disposition of delight that is exercised in response to our faith in him.

This is why Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please him..." And in Hebrews 11, in the "Hall of Faith," do you know the first Old Testament example of *faith*?

Hebrews 11:4:

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain...

This is stunning. The first truth of our God-centered paradigm shift on giving is that God, who is wholly greater and separate from us, and who needs nothing, is so good in his very nature that he unchangeably exercises pleasure in response to our faith in him, which is what giving expresses.

If you give to God with faith in who he is — *that you believe he exists and rewards those who seek him* — then his irrevocable, trustworthy response is acceptance. Regard. He is pleased.

He is pleased by our “plastic donuts,” a helpful illustration from Jeff Anderson in his book, *Plastic Donuts: Giving That Delights the Heart of the Father* (Multnomah, 2013). Every illustration is imperfect in some way, but illustrations can still help, and this one helps me.

As the story goes, Jeff was sitting in his living room when his two-year-old daughter was playing nearby with her plastic kitchen set. She brought Jeff, her dad, a little plastic donut. Because his posture toward her is delight, and she was acting out of the genuineness of her heart, he *accepted* the plastic donut. He gobbled it up with a smile on face, making all the expected Cookie-monster-type sounds. He exercised his delight, and his little girl saw it. *And do you know what she did?*

She went back to her kitchen and got another plastic donut, and she brought it to her dad again — why? Because she enjoyed the joy of her father. *She looked up!*

God accepts our acceptable offerings, *and how are we not amazed?* We see God doing this all throughout the Bible, and it still happens today. In Philippians 4:8, Paul calls financial gifts to the church “a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.” And the first thing we should think is *What a good God!*

The God who needs nothing and gives us everything is pleased when we give to him in faith.

2. God accepts gifts decided in our hearts.

The criterion of acceptable gifts has to do with faith in God – that’s base-level. And then in 2 Corinthians 8–9, Paul tells us more.

For the context here, Paul has been collecting funds from several churches for the struggling church in Jerusalem. He talks about this in Romans 15 and also in 1 Corinthians 16. He had previously told the Corinthian church to set aside the money, and now he’s preparing to receive it, *and it’s really important to Paul that they understand giving*. The gift must be “a willing gift, not an exaction.” And a willing gift means, as Paul says in verse 2 Corinthians 9:7,

Each one must give as he has decided in his own heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion....

Other English translations say, “Each one must give as he has made up his own mind.” *To make up your mind. To decide in your heart*. Both ways of putting it are getting at the same idea, and it means that whatever we give, we are making that decision, which is both the decision to give and *the amount to give*.

We decide how much we give, and that decision is based upon our ability. That’s what Paul says in Chapter 8, verse 12: an offering is acceptable “according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.” And this is a principle we see in the Old Testament.

If you didn’t own a herd, God didn’t expect a bull. But if you didn’t own a herd, how about giving a goat? Or a sheep? If

you didn't have any of them, how about a pigeon?

We give according to what we have, and when it comes to what we have, *the amount matters*. And here I want to dispel the notion that "it doesn't really matter how much you give because it's the heart that counts." You may have heard something like that before, that "It's the heart that matters, not the amount."

Well, that's just not true, because it's precisely the amount that engages the heart. When it comes to every other thing in life, the amounts matter to us. Our mortgage. Our rent. That couch we're looking to buy. Whether or not to get the small or medium at Jamba Juice, or the large chips and guac at Chipotle.

We all have amounts that matter to us. The question is whether giving to God is included in that.

According to what we each have, the amount we give matters, and we determine that amount in our hearts.

These are the instructions of the apostle Paul: we each give according to what we have, and that giving is *decided* in our own hearts, not reluctantly or under compulsion (see 2 Corinthians 8:12; 9:7).

And this should be exciting to us, but I realize that it's far too easy to read this and see it as a reason not to give, because we think, "Welp, I don't really have anything to give." Or we say, "You know, my heart feels some reluctance. I'm not super cheerful, so I better not."

Brothers and sisters, as someone who knows it all too well from his own heart, if we're honest, we recognize that a lot of times we look for reasons not to give. We've all been there before, when there is an opportunity to be generous

but we immediately begin arguing ourselves out of giving. It's amazing how quickly we can mount a case for why we shouldn't give.

What if instead of looking for reasons not to give, we looked for reasons to give? And if our hearts feel clunky and reluctant, what if instead of using that as an excuse not to give, we prayed, "God, help my heart"?

The question is *How can I, based upon my ability, be generous?*

Do we look for reasons *not* to be generous, or do we *want* to be generous?

Now here's the part that blows my mind: if we want to be generous, God will make us generous. God *is able* to make all grace abound to us. *He will* supply and multiply our seed for sowing. *He will* increase the harvest of our righteousness. *We will* be enriched in every way to be generous in every way.

That's what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:8-11.

God accepts gifts we decide in our hearts, which come from our confession of the gospel of Christ (see 2 Corinthians 9:13). This is God-centered, gospel-driven generosity. 2 Corinthians 8:9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

And this leads to the third truth of this God-centered paradigm shift.

3. God is the cheerfulest giver of all.

2 Corinthians 8:7:

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

God loves a cheerful giver. Can you imagine that? A Father who gladly gobbles up our gifts to him that he doesn't need?

It's easy for us to get stuck looking down. We get stuck on our hearts, stuck on the amount, just stuck on our ability. But the main theme of 2 Corinthians 9, and of giving overall, is not our ability, but God's. *We look up!*

The God who made everything and who needs nothing, this God, our heavenly Father — *he loves cheerful givers because he himself is the cheerfulest of all givers!* Jesus tells us,

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." (Luke 12:32)

God delights to give to us. Our Father's grace is never given begrudgingly, but he lavishes it upon us with pleasure, according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (see Philippians 4:19). God gives according to *his* ability, and how much is that?

Infinite.

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8, italics added)

Our giving is only because of God's giving to us — because of

his surpassing grace to us — which produces in us thanksgiving to him (2 Corinthians 9:11). Do you see how inescapably God-centered this is? We look up.

And when we do, when we fix our hearts on who God is and what he gives to us in Christ, we remember that his grace toward us is immeasurable (see Ephesians 2:7). There is no border to his ability, no end to the riches of his glory. It is a wonderful, biblical understatement to say that God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (see Psalm 50:10). There is nothing that he does not own, nothing that exists apart from his will. And if he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things (Romans 8:32)? *God is our Father and he cares for us.*

So it's fitting that Paul concludes his teaching on giving the way he does in 2 Corinthians 9:15. What else could we say?

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

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And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

2 Corinthians 9:8



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