

2 Corinthians 9:6-8
The Privilege of Giving
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Let me begin today by explaining what I am trying to do. I have been preaching a series through the book of James, and our most recent text included the command, "Submit to God." My sermon two weeks ago was largely an examination of that command. Last week, I discussed submitting to God in the sense of submitting to God's secret decretive will. In review, I said that we submit to God's secret will 1) by accepting that God is in full and complete control of whatever happens, and yet at the same time 2) by accepting that God is not to be blamed for anything evil or sinful that happens, and 3) by accepting that God is working whatever happens to His own glory, which is by far the greatest possible good of any good which can be accomplished in history. In fact, the glory of God is in a category all to itself because it alone is the final good, the ultimate intrinsic good, the foundational good which is good in and of itself simply because it is.

That is what we looked at last week. This week I want to examine what it means to submit to God's will in terms of what we call God's revealed will or God's preceptive will. This is God's revelation of what He takes pleasure in because it most conforms to His own wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. God's revealed will is what is truly right and good as God defines right and good. It is called God's preceptive will

because it consists of God's revealed precepts or commands, including both law command as in the ten commandments and gospel command as in, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is called God's revealed will because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. God's revealed will is the holy rule of life which God has revealed to us as the way of life He takes pleasure in. God is delighted when we submit to His revealed will, and God is grieved when we don't.

We submit to God's revealed will by accepting that God's rule of life is the best way to live, indeed the only right and proper way to live, and by trying by God's grace to live that way.

Now let me make clear that trying by God's grace to obey God's law as a rule of life is not legalism. Some people think it is legalism whenever one mentions the law as an element in the true Christian life, but that is not the case. There is a proper use of God's law and there is also an improper use. Legalism is an improper use of God's law, a misuse of God's law. Legalism is trying to obey God's law in order to earn one's way into heaven. Legalism is trying to live a good enough life in order to deserve going to heaven. Legalism is trying to establish one's own righteous record of law keeping as a basis for God's accepting him. That simply will not work for two reasons. First, even if we could obey God's law perfectly for the rest of our lives, that would not be a payment for the sins we have already committed. Second, we can't keep the law of God perfectly because of our inclination toward sinning.

The moral law of God is the Christian's rule of life, his guideline to the way of life which pleases God, but it is not the Christian's way of salvation. In Titus chapter three, Paul said,

- 4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared,
- 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us ...

I don't know how Paul could have said more clearly that we are not saved by the imperfect righteous works which we ourselves do. We are saved by the perfect righteous work which Jesus has already done. That righteous work includes both His sinless life of perfect obedience and His death upon the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice, as a vicarious punishment for our sin. We must trust the work of Christ and not anything we ourselves do as the basis for our salvation, as the ground for our having a righteous standing before God.

In fact, a part of submitting to God's revealed will is submitting to the good news that salvation is by grace through faith and not of works lest anyone should boast. Paul specifically says that in Romans chapter ten:

Romans 10:1-11

- 1 Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.
- 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.

- 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not **submitted** to the righteousness of God.
- 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.
- 5 For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them."
- 6 But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above)
- 7 or, " 'Who will descend into the abyss?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).
- 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach):
- 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.
- 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.
- 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

In these verses, Paul warns against legalism, which he calls “the righteousness which is of the law.” Paul says that for those who believe the gospel, Christ is the end of the law; that is, the termination of trying to establish one’s own righteousness through keeping the law. Believing the gospel means looking to Christ alone to establish our righteous standing before God. The one who believes in Christ has what Paul calls both “the

righteousness of God” and “the righteousness of faith.” Paul is referring to a perfect righteous standing which is totally acceptable to God and which is ours through trusting Christ as opposed to trusting our own efforts. We trust His death to remove our guilt before God and our condemnation by God. We accept His record of perfect obedience as our legal righteousness before God. We need to swallow our pride and submit to this salvation which is all of grace, this salvation which is an undeserved gift of mercy earned for us by the work of Jesus. This is a vital part of submitting to God’s will.

We are saved by the work of Christ and not by our own works of righteousness. But a part of the salvation Christ gives us is a salvation from sinful living and unto righteous living. Jesus takes away our love of sinning and replaces it with a desire to please God by doing what is right in God’s sight. In this sense, we come to love God’s law, not as a way of salvation but as a rule of life. Jesus writes the law of God upon our hearts, which means that Jesus makes living in a way that is pleasing to God our greatest desire and aspiration in life.

As Christians, we want to do what is right, and we try to do what is right, but not in our own power. Even when we try to do good works, salvation is still by grace through faith. We daily commune with Jesus, fellowship with Jesus, and look to Jesus for the strength to do what is right. We recognize that apart from Jesus, we are powerless. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. Apart from Jesus, we are as unfruitful as a branch severed from a grape vine. We look to Jesus for the power to do what is right. Then after we do what is right, we look to Jesus to cleanse what

we have done of any clinging sin. Even when we do what is right as defined by God's moral law, our motives and goals are never absolutely perfect. There are always some remnants of selfishness and pride clinging to the best of our efforts. We look to Jesus to wash these away, making our good works done in His power acceptable to God.

Now I have spoken about submitting to God's revealed will in general and in the context of grace. I want also today to focus on one specific area of obeying God's revealed will. I want to look at the good work of giving. I could look at anything commanded in the Bible as a necessary part of the life of obedience as an example of submitting to God's revealed will. I believe looking at the grace of giving will be helpful because there is evidence that many younger Christians today do not understand this responsibility and privilege. In evangelical churches today, 50% of the members are not making any financial contributions to their church. And 20% of the members are making 80% of the contributions. There is also evidence that a disproportionate number of that 20% are the elderly. In the 1990s, one Baptist church reported that whenever a senior member of the church died, it took on average five members under 35 to replace that person's contributions. I am not here referring to our own church, but to what statistics tell us about evangelical churches in general.

When I was young, churches may have been stressing giving too much to the neglect of other Biblical doctrines and duties and to the point of appearing greedy and materialistic. Yet the evidence now indicates that the church at large is not stressing giving

enough. We live in an age that is increasingly individualistic and self-centered and insubordinate. Churches which hope to build their numbers by tickling people's ears, by telling the children of today's culture what they want to hear, are not going to teach the responsibility of giving. Yet we must teach the full counsel of God, and that includes the responsibility of giving. And I need to stress that this giving is not only a responsibility but even more so a privilege. People in churches which do not teach them about giving are in a very real way being neglected and deprived of precious truth.

In the spirit of not neglecting you and in the spirit of teaching you the full counsel of God, I want to consider our Scripture reading for today under three headings: the perception of giving, the pleasure of giving and the provision for giving.

First, the perception of giving. It is very important how we view our financial giving to the kingdom of God. We are not going to be very enthusiastic about giving to the church if we view it primarily as a necessary but sad financial loss of funds or as a waste of money which could have been put to much better use or a burdensome responsibility. Paul says that we should instead view giving to God's kingdom as sowing seed.

When a person harvests a crop, he uses much of the crop to meet his immediate material needs. He uses some to feed his family. He sells some to get needed funds. But he also sets some aside as seed corn. This is seed preserved for sowing when the next season comes. The seed corn is not wasted when put in the ground. It is an investment in the future. To eat the seed corn or

to use it for anything other than sowing is shortsighted and foolish.

When God prospers us, He is enabling us to meet our earthly needs and responsibilities. But God is also giving us some seed corn to sow in God's field. As God prospers us, we need to set aside a proportionate amount as seed corn, as money we are going to sow in the sense of investing it in God's work on earth.

We shouldn't set aside all our material wealth as spiritual seed corn. We do need to remember that there are other responsibilities we need to take care of in life. We need to provide for the needs of our families. We need to save some money for possible hard times. We are responsible for paying our taxes. We should hope to leave an inheritance to our children, and so on. Yet we should also give some to the church as God prospers us. The guideline which we find in Scripture is the tithe, which is 10%. Not 10% of all that we own, but 10% of the new wealth God brings to us as He prospers us.

One time a member of a church I pastored lost his business to a fire and was due a large insurance settlement. He commented to me once that his tithe of the insurance settlement would be a large donation to the church. I responded that he was free to give the church a gift from his insurance settlement if he chose to, but he didn't owe a tithe from it. The insurance settlement was not really an increase in his wealth. When he received the settlement, he would not be any wealthier in terms of assets than he was before the fire. The tithe is not 10% of what we have but 10% of the increase God gives us.

We first read about the tithe when Abraham gave 10% of the spoils of war to Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest of God most high. Jacob promised God a tithe at Bethel when fleeing from Esau. The tithe was later included in the law of Moses as a means of supporting the ministry of the priests and Levites. Jesus also mentioned the tithe in His teaching. This is especially important to us because Jesus sometimes gave hints as to whether practices would be continued or discontinued under the new covenant. For example, Jesus gave indications in His teaching that the old covenant dietary laws would be set aside and that Gentiles would be included in the coming Israel of the new covenant. Yet Jesus gave no indication that the principle of the tithe would be set aside in the new age. Here is what Jesus said about the tithe:

Matthew 23:23

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for neglecting the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. But regarding their giving the tithe, Jesus said this was something they should not have left undone. Jesus validated the principle of tithing in His teaching. And Paul taught the principle of proportionate giving of one's increase in wealth in 1 Corinthians 16:2:

1 Corinthians 16:2

2 On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.

As God prospers us, we should give a proportionate portion to the church with the tithe as a guideline as to what God regards as reasonable.

We should also recognize that proportionate giving is a good use of our money, even the best possible use. Sowing is not wasting or throwing away. It is an investment with the expectation of a return. And Paul says that the more we sow, the more we will reap rewards.

We must regard these rewards not legalistically but in the context of grace. Rewards are grace upon grace. It is only through God's enabling grace which comes to us through Jesus that we have the desire to give and the means to give. It is only by the grace of Jesus that our giving is cleansed from clinging sin. And then it is only by God's grace that God rewards us for giving. God doesn't owe us a thing in response to our gifts to Him, but He chooses to reward our giving. Some of the rewards may be blessings in this life, but they are primarily eternal blessings we will experience in the life to come.

Our first point is the perception of giving. We should regard it as an investment in the eternal, as a form of sowing. Our second point is the pleasure of giving. God is concerned about the heart attitude behind our giving. We can give huge amounts to God,

but God will not be pleased if we give with a grudging, sorrowful spirit. God will not be pleased if we are as reluctant to let go of our money as Lot's wife was reluctant to leave Sodom. We should give cheerfully. We should give recognizing it as a great privilege. We are taking of the things of this world, things which are passing away, fading away, things which we cannot keep, things which we will have to leave behind at death. We are taking a portion of these things and investing them in the eternal, putting them into a form not subject to deterioration and loss, putting them into a form we can enjoy after this life. Giving is an investment in treasure in heaven where thieves do not break in and steal and where moths and rust do not corrupt. There is no safer investment. If we truly believe this, we will give cheerfully. If we truly believe this, we will regard giving as a privilege and not as a burdensome responsibility.

God cares about the spirit in which we give. God receives the widow's mite given with the right spirit as a precious expression of worship. And God rejects the seemingly generous offering of an Ananias and Saphira when given in a dishonest, hypocritical spirit or in a begrudging spirit or in a proud spirit.

We should weigh our God given responsibilities in life which require funds, we should weigh the principle of the tithe, we should weigh the privilege of investing in the eternal, and then we should purpose in our hearts or decide what amount we can responsibly invest in God's kingdom. And then we should do so with joy.

We have looked at the perception of giving and the pleasure of giving. Our last point is the provision for giving. When we give our tithe or more to the church, that is an act of faith. We may wonder at the time how we can make it on 90% or less of our income. Well, we may have to do without some material luxuries in order to invest in the eternal. Maybe we can't afford that better car or that better house or that longer vacation and also give to God. Yet we can rest assured that when we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, God is going to provide for our real needs in life. God is going to provide for those who trust in Him so abundantly that they will have an abundance to accomplish every good work God calls them to do.

In the second part of "The Pilgrim's Progress," John Bunyan included this riddle:

A man there was, tho` some did count him mad,
The more he cast away the more he had.

Jesus tells us the answer to that riddle in Mark chapter 10:

Mark 10:28-30

- 28 Then Peter began to say to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You."
- 29 So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's,

30 "who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time-- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions-- and in the age to come, eternal life."