

**Reluctantly Into the Future?
(The Future of Giving)**

2 Corinthians 9

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Note: We call this Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. But actually this letter was most likely his third letter to them. There are references to a letter Paul sent that we don't have.¹ At Chapter 9, Paul is speaking to the saints in Corinth about a special offering he's coming by to pick up with some men from Macedonia. He's sent "Advance Men" ahead with this letter to remind them of their blessings and to encourage them to be "cheerful givers."

If you want an easy way to remember what life was like in the Corinthian Church **think columns**. Architectural columns. Any architect can tell you that a Doric column has a simple, classic design and an Ionic column is known for its scrolled capitals at the top.

But a Corinthian column is very decorative. It is adorned with flowers and leaves at the capitals, and the shafts are fluted and fancy.

<p>This is how we can remember the basic characteristic of those first Christians at Corinth. They were fancy people – or at least that's how they saw themselves.</p>

Today Corinth is still a prosperous city in Greece, on the Gulf of Corinth, off the Mediterranean Sea,² but in Paul's day it was the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. This letter was intended to be heard by all the Christians in that area – in the province of Achaia.

When Paul first visited Corinth, it was about 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It had been a successful first mission trip and the Christian population had grown considerably, giving them great confidence – perhaps *too much* confidence, at least in themselves.

The Corinthians believed they were wise and spiritually mature, prompting Paul to remind them that *actually* only God is truly wise and that they had a long way to go.³ They believed they were powerful and successful, prompting Paul to remind them that *actually* God tends to choose the weak and foolish for service.⁴ They were people who had made a name for themselves in the trading industries, prompting Paul to remind them that people who already "have all they want" tend to be poor followers of Jesus.⁵

¹ 1 Corinthians 5:9 mentions this very first (lost) letter.

² Today is called ????????? (Corinthos).

³ 1 Corinthians 2:6, 14-15.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 4:8.

In Paul's *first* letter to the Corinthian Church, he addressed some interesting problems that prove that church life was rarely boring, based on letters the leaders had first sent to him. They had wondered what to do, for example, about a church member who was living with his mother-in-law (and apparently it wasn't about saving money on rent)⁶. And then there was the dispute over the length of women's hair.⁷

People were suing each other, getting drunk at communion, opting out of circumcision.⁸ "***Were any of these things okay***" the people wondered. Paul became much like a theological Dear Abby. Or better yet, a rabbi for all seasons.

By the time Paul wrote this *second* letter to the Corinthians, he had visited with them once again, face to face. During that visit, someone had deeply offended him, and so much of this second letter is about reconciliation. Paul reminds us that when we hurt each other – even in church (and sometimes *especially* in church), God can transform even the most broken of relationships. "Do not lose heart," Paul says.⁹

Another feature in this second letter was Paul's attempt to get the Corinthians to stop navel gazing and start looking around them at **what the Church really needed**. If the Church was going to expand and spread the amazing news that, with Christ, there could be healing and resurrection, how might *they* help make that happen?

In the 8th and 9th chapters of this letter, Paul shares with them ***an opportunity***. Some 900 miles to the east of them, the church in Jerusalem was suffering terribly. There was widespread poverty and persecution. And so Paul had asked the Christians to the west to give money to help the Jerusalem Christians.

North of the Corinthians were the Macedonians who were poor people, especially compared to the Corinthians. But they had given so generously that Paul heaped on the praise in Chapter 8. But in this 9th Chapter, Paul tries to inspire the wealthy Corinthians to give even ***more*** generously because . . . well, they **had** more to give.

Some Macedonians would be traveling to Corinth with Paul to collect the special offering for Jerusalem, and Paul didn't want them to embarrass themselves if, when they came, they couldn't make good on their promise to give and give generously.

I thought it necessary (Paul says) to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a volunteer gift and not as an extortion.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 5:1-13.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:1-16.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, 6:1-8, & 7:17-20.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:1ff.

This past Tuesday, we took **three mini-vans full of Health Kits** for tsunami victims to collection sites in Washington. Three mini-vans full of bags of toothbrushes, washclothes, combs, and soap. We had – it was estimated – over 1000 Health Kits to share. And over \$500 was collected to cover shipping costs. This was an extraordinary response!

I know of no one who felt obliged to give a health kit. I never heard a soul complain about how we are always collecting things for people. I never even heard anyone fuss over the fact that the lobby of our church looked like a junk yard with sacks and crates and boxes of Health Kits tossed in a less-than-orderly fashion. We had to step over them and around them to get to the education wing. But no body cared. In stead the reaction was *giddiness* over how wonderful it was to see so much generosity.

Paul said, “God loves a cheerful giver” and the Greek is actually better translated “*hilarious giver*.” Paul tells us to give lavishly, wildly, hilariously. When was the last time you were a “hilarious giver”?

Why is it that it’s so hard to transfer that kind of “hilarious giving” to the ongoing financial giving to this congregation? There are many generous people who give lavishly to this congregation. But many of us have a hard time with committed giving – much less with hilariously cheerful giving.

We, like the Corinthians, enjoy some degree of prosperity. *We*, like the Corinthians, try to be generous givers. But also – we, like the Corinthians could be giving *more*. There are needs that are not being met.

The common wisdom is that today most people are too materialistic and selfish, sharing too little of what we have with too little commitment to something bigger than ourselves. **But studies show something different.**

The Lilly Foundation did a study with wealthy churches several years ago and what they found was surprising. Most of the people knew that money couldn’t buy them happiness. Most of them wanted to experience the abundant grace Paul describes here, to live full and meaningful lives.

What the researchers at Lilly found was that people were not driven by *consumerism* as much as they were driven by *anxiety*. They wanted more money not to impress the neighbors. They wanted more money to take care of their families.

The researcher called it **SUV Theology** – a theology in which people believe their families will be saved by giving them the safest car, the safest neighborhoods, the best

schools, the surest security systems. They found that people didn't drive SUVs because of its status. They drove SUVs for safety.¹⁰

We deal with life's anxiety's based on *what* we trust or *who* we trust in our heart of hearts. *Who or what we trust* sits at the crux of explaining how we live, how we choose to share our wealth or anything else we have.

The future of giving to God's Church or to anything depends upon trusting in One who is greater, stronger, more powerful than worldly things. The future of giving depends upon whether or not we really believe that it is God who provides the blessings we really need. Or do we believe we can *buy* what will save us?

Bob Bohl, a former moderator of the General Assembly, tells the story of sitting in a church meeting talking finances with the elders. The numbers didn't look good. There were great needs, enormous expenses coming up and the income just wouldn't cover it.

The church he served was quite prosperous, but people were cautious in their giving. They had enormous expenses of their own. They had debts to pay and children to raise.

And as they were sitting there wondering what could be done to balance the budget, one of the elders said, "If only . . . if only someone would die and leave us with everything we need." To which their pastor, Bob Bohl replied, "Somebody already has."

Whatever we give, whatever sacrifices we make pales compared to what **God** has given. And when, in our faith journeys, we experience that moment when we get it, when we finally get what God was willing to give up to show how much we are loved – it makes us **giddy with joy**.

No longer can we be reluctant givers. The joy of being loved, the joy of being **in** love with God, the power that comes with enormous blessing – makes us respond with generous hearts.

It is with this heart that God has given to us. And God has planted in us seeds with which to grow the Church. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

Let us pray:

Holy God, we say we trust you and believe in you. Help us to live in such a way that it is clear that we know only You can save us. Make us generous spirits, quick to share not only our wealth, but also our faith in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

¹⁰ From a sermon preached by John Buchanan at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago on October 12, 2003. See <http://www.fourthchurch.org/1012103sermon.html>.

