

Where do you as a Christian get the power to change your world, your living arrangement, and your life? The Bible says that one of the critical keys to such power for change is a radical generosity with all that you own.

The Power of Giving

Paul tells the Corinthians, who were a group of Greeks living in a beautiful port city, “Because of your giving by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God...” (2 Corinthians 9:13)

Early Christianity spread like lightning across the Roman Empire, especially among the poor and slave classes, transforming lives and society in measure because of the radical generosity of those who had been changed by the rabbi named Jesus. An early Christian document describes the reason behind this:

“Christians busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven... They marry and have children but do not kill unwanted babies. They share their table with all, but not their bed with all. They love everyone, but are persecuted by all. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things.

-A 1st century Christian writer

Unlike our modern culture, in which we share our bed with many and our money with few, early Christians shared their bed with one (their spouse) and their money with many. They were promiscuous with their monies, not their bodies. They gave their money away in eye-popping proportions to help people and promote the church’s ministry, and consequently they found themselves more satisfied with what they had (short of everything, yet plenty of all things).

How did Christianity transform the cool and corrupting Roman world? How did they sweep away all the older religious and social constructs of mythology and superstition? Apparently no one could match or explain the beauty of their lives. They gave their resources in a proportion and a joy that the surrounding, materialistic culture had never seen and could not explain. The first Christians in Jerusalem immediately began to practice radical generosity:

“Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” (Acts 2:45)

“They did not consider that any of their possessions were their own.” (Acts 4:32)

Their generosity had an immense impact on the culture: “They enjoyed the favor of all the people... the Lord added daily to their number.” (Acts 2:47)

The Roman Emperor Julian wrote: “Their success lies in their charity to strangers... The impious Galileans (i.e. Christians) support both their own poor and ours as well!” The world was astonished by Christians’ unmaterialistic lifestyle and profound generosity with everything that they owned.

The Power for Giving

When Paul asks the Corinthians to give to the famine victims in Jerusalem, he says: “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love... 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 through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:8-9) One chapter later, he says that Christian giving must never be motivated reluctantly or under compulsion, but “cheerfully,” for by radical giving Christians prove themselves to be genuine children of God. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7, 13) Paul’s words are very searching in our American culture.

If we do not give away our money in remarkable proportions, we have not grasped (or we are not currently remembering) Christ’s generosity in saving us. Let’s put it more starkly: You will always give effortlessly to that which is your salvation, to those things that give your life meaning. If Jesus is the One who saved you, your money flows out easily into His work, His people, His causes. If, however, your real religion is your appearance, your social status, or your pleasure, your money flows most easily into those items and symbols.

Radical generosity is therefore an inevitable sign of real grace in the heart. A minister once wrote: “There are many hearing me now who know that they are not Christians because they do not love to give. To give largely and liberally requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with his lifeblood than with his money.” (Robert Murray McChesney)

Imagine a person who is deathly ill, and he finds a doctor with a medicine that can cure him. “But,” the doctor says, “the medicine is very expensive, and you may have to give

up your home and many of your possessions to purchase it.” The ill person says, “So what? What good are my possessions and money to me if I don’t have the medicine? It is now more precious to me than anything I own.” These other things that used to seem so important are now expendable by comparison with the surpassing value of the medicine.

Even so, the grace of God makes Christ so precious to us that our possessions become eternally and utterly expendable to us. They used to be crucial to our happiness, but they are not so now. “To you who believe... He is precious.” (1 Peter 2:7) If Jesus is the great God of the universe who was voluntarily torn to shreds on the cross to pay all your debts of sin, then your attitude toward all that you own is forever changed.

The Power in Giving

Some practical guidelines for Christian giving:

1. The Guideline of the Tithe

In the Old Testament, all the leaders were required to give a tithe, 1/10 of all their yearly agricultural produce (income) and 1/10 of their flocks and cattle (capital). Examine Leviticus 27:30-34 and Malachi 3:6-12. God considers any smaller proportion as “robbery.” Why? Everything that we have is really God’s – we only have it because God gave it to us to use. Therefore we are His trustees, His portfolio managers, His bankers, and He allows us to spend 90% of His wealth on ourselves. This is more than reasonable! A trustee who does not give the owner his own money is a thief.

In the New Testament, there is nowhere a direct command to believers to tithe. Instead we are to “give as Christ gave.” But have we received less from God than the Old Testament believers did when they were commanded to tithe? Are we less responsible to serve Him than they were? How can we imagine that God expects less from us than he received from those believers before Jesus ever arrived physically upon the scene? The inescapable conclusion is: The tithe is a minimum guideline for our giving, a foundational percentage.

2. The Guideline of Sacrifice

Paul tells us that the impoverished Macedonians contributed to the needy in Jerusalem. They gave as much as they were able and even beyond their abilities. (2 Corinthians) In other words, they gave sacrificially. Our giving therefore must affect the way we live. It must “cut

into” our lifestyle. Otherwise we are not giving in the biblical proportions marked by sacrifice.

Jonathan Edwards kept meeting people who said: “I can’t afford to give to the church and the poor.” He concluded that we really mean: “I can’t afford to give without greatly inconveniencing myself.” Edwards wrote: “If we be never obliged to relieve others’ burdens but when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor’s burdens when we bear no burdens at all?” If your giving does not burden you or cut into your lifestyle in any way, you must give more.

3. The Guideline of Responsibility

While the Macedonians gave beyond their ability, Paul elsewhere tells us that we must give “according to ability.” (Acts 11:29) Many Christians realize that they cannot give in biblical proportions because they must meet other God-given responsibilities (care for one’s health and safety, care for other family members, meeting legal financial obligations, etc.), some of which may be unnecessarily high.

We must not be irresponsible in our obligations. Debts must be paid (Romans 13:8) and family needs taken care of with responsible action. But giving regularly, systematically, and intentionally should not be put off until tithing is possible. God will accept and honor our gifts to Him at whatever level we are faithfully giving. Has tithing become our immediate goal for minimal obedience?

4. The Guideline of Intentionality

Paul directed the Corinthians to be systematic and thoughtful in their giving. He told them to save apportion of their wealth each week to give to God’s work. (1 Corinthians 16:2)

Usually, an actual tally of spontaneous and unplanned giving reveals that it was not done in biblical proportions and that there was little sacrifice involved. Paul presses us to be regular, to follow a plan. He continually sent the Corinthians reminders about their giving. This shows that we must be willing to let the church similarly instruct us. How easy it is to conveniently forget our resolutions and intentions! We must avoid subjectivity in giving and become intentional. Here are three ways to do that:

a. Begin by reading Matthew 6:19-34, 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, 9:6-15, and Malachi 3:6-12. Ask yourself: do you need to adjust your giving in light of

eternal values to change the world through radical generosity?

b. Estimate what percentage of your money is going to:
*God’s ministry (the local church, Christian missionaries, Christian ministries, and Christian workers)

*People (outside your family) with economic/physical needs.

How close is your giving outside your own concerns to a minimum standard of 10% of your gross income?

c. Develop a regular plan of giving:

(1) Decide intentionally with pen and paper in hand to begin a sacrificial and radical responsibility.

(2) Prayerfully determine how this giving proportion will be distributed among causes that honor Christ and reflect your responsibility to the church within which you fellowship.

(3) Decide a way to immediately set aside the Lord’s portion of your income whenever you receive money. Decide what intervals (how and how often) you will give. Write down the amount you plan to give, so that you can compare it to your actual giving. This will help you check yourself during the year.

Most of these concepts about money will make virtually no sense at all if you do not believe in God. However, if you do, remember that there cannot be significant spiritual growth in your life unless your earnings and how you think about them are placed in God’s hands. The more you trust in God with your material treasure, the more He will entrust to you with His spiritual treasure. (Luke 16:9-12) Look what happened when the Son of God opened His hand and let go of His wealth. He saved radically a countless host of people. Open your hand and watch His power flow into your world and life for radical change.

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Power, Change, and Money

a pamphlet on
radical Christian generosity

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