

## **“How We Give”**

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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November 15, 2009

If you think church fund raising is only a modern phenomenon, you will be surprised to hear the background of today’s scripture. We know for a fact that stewardship campaigns existed in the Christian church at least back as far as the year 55 A.D., because in this letter to the church at Corinth, Paul is fundraising.

He is on a mission to raise money for the church in Jerusalem. People have come to hear his letter read out loud in worship. Paul is encouraging them to give money for the work of the church. He isn’t there himself. He’s sent his advance team to get the congregation ready, to gear them up. Paul wants them to be prepared to make their pledges and give their offering when he arrives.

We have our own advance team here at LHPC this year: Andy Kershaw, Crosswave Youth, Jeff Higgins, Hollis and Zoe Jacobie, not to mention all of you who gave your witness last August when Roger tape recorded you. All this to get us all ready to give joyfully to the life and work of this church.

Let’s listen to what God’s word has to say to us about giving, this time listening to a paraphrase of *The Message*:

*Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.*

*God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you’re ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,*

*He throws caution to the winds, giving to the needy in reckless abandon. His right-living, right-giving ways never run out, never wear out.*

*This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.*

There are two images that leap out at us in today’s scriptures. One is the image of the reckless farmer, carelessly sowing seed all over the place! God’s overflowing generosity, spilling out all over the place. This *image* is all over the place in both the gospel and the epistle we just heard. The second image is similar.

The second is the image of hilarious giving. This one isn't so obvious, because it's hidden in the Greek word that is translated as "cheerful". Folks, when it says in the NIV, "God loves a cheerful giver," the English really doesn't capture it. "Cheerful" sounds like the cashier at the Dunkin Donuts counter---sweet, but not too interesting. "Cheerful" might be what happens when you are touring a nursing home with your mother---nice, but not really what mom desires. Cheerful doesn't quite cut it. No, the Greek word Paul uses is "hilarion". Hilarion. As in HILARIOUS.

Oh! Just saying the word "hilarious" in church makes me want to laugh! God loves a hilarious giver! (Does anyone think this sounds as funny as I do?) God loves a great laugh and God loves to hear us laugh when we give!

I hardly knew the Rev. Charlie Wallace. Charlie died suddenly almost a month ago, just days after I had seen him at the Cumberland Church in Shiloh for the camp meeting. Charlie was a life-long Cumberland pastor. I am guessing he was well into his 80's. He had served as the Stated Clerk for the Red River Presbytery for a long, long time. The role of the Stated Clerk is an important one, and the usual Stated Clerk is often a very serious individual. Not so with Charlie. He always had a twinkle in his eye. Charlie was one of the most hilarious stated clerks I had ever met. He was funny and irreverent. Down to earth and completely spontaneous, casting his words all over the place like some farmer throwing seed to the chickens. I don't know, but I wouldn't be one bit surprised if Charlie had grown up on a farm.

Charlie didn't know it, but he gave me a lesson on fund-raising just six days before he died. It was a lesson in hilarious giving. I was the guest preacher for the evening. I will be honest with you. I had never even **been** to a camp meeting in my entire life, let alone preached at one. This was my first.

The funniest thing about the evening for me, though, was Charlie. First, we all listened to rousing gospel music provided by the Bethel College choir. It was fantastic! We were doing our best to sway in our lawn chairs, not getting too rowdy, not tipping over or anything. It was Presbyterian-style swaying. Then we dug into an endless potluck, also Presbyterian-style. I don't think I'd ever seen five kinds of potato salad and eight kinds of pickles on one table before.

The meal was over, the sun was getting low, and Charlie brought me up to the front of the crowd. He ran to get me a chair and he sat me down right in the middle of this empty spot by the microphone. Then Charlie grabbed the mike.

"We're taking up a collection tonight folks, and we're gonna do it before the preachin' starts. Now I know Anne's got a good message waiting for you, but we're not gonna wait 'til she gets done preachin' to take up the money. We're gonna do it now. And here's what we need for the Bethel College kids. We need \$3,000 tonight. They've come a long way to sing to us, and we are gonna send them off with \$3,000". (I looked around. There were maybe 150 people there. \$3000? No way. Lesson #1).

Charlie went on for quite a while. I began to feel a little odd, sitting up there in front of everyone, just waiting. When they began to pass the hat around (and it was a REAL hat, a straw cowboy hat), I ran to grab my purse and I emptied my wallet into it. No way I would have emptied my wallet of all my cash if he hadn't said how much was needed! Lesson #2.

Well the hat went around and then they counted, and all the while Charlie is carrying on, bantering up front with everyone. Lots of people knew him well and they were bantering right back, some of them yelling at him to "sit down and be quiet". Charlie came right back with, "We're gonna take as long as we need to get this money for these kids."

The counters tallied the money and came up to Charlie, whispering in his ear. He grinned. "OK folks, you done good, but not quite good enough. We've got \$2100. We need \$900 more. Like I said, we might be here a long time, but we're not going home 'til we got it." Lesson #2.

They passed that hat two more times that evening. By the third time, it was done, and everyone cheered! Then I began to preach in the dark, but it was almost an afterthought. The sermon had already been given, by Charlie Wallace, and it was a lesson in hilarious, joyful giving. Lesson #3.

How do we give? Generously, like the crazy sower! With wild abandon! Leaping about, throwing seeds this way and that, running, shouting, all kinds of seeds, no rhyme nor reason. No end in sight. Seeds spilling out into the roadway, seeds feeding the birds, seeds peppering the air, seeds falling on weeds.

How do we give? Hilariously, joyfully, sure of our abundance in God, excited with the other givers all around us, our mouths watering for the fruits that will grow, for the plants that will spring up, yielding an outcome we cannot begin to imagine.

How do we give? Paul says we should give systematically, putting aside money every week.<sup>1</sup> That doesn't sound too hilarious, but it's helpful!

How **much** should we give? It depends upon how much we want to reap. It depends upon how big a harvest we are aiming for. Being a good Pharisee, Paul would have encouraged tithing. Today, 10% may be too much if you are on a limited income. 10% isn't nearly enough if you are in a high income bracket.

Do you know, percentage-wise, Americans in very low income brackets give *three times more* to charity than those in high income brackets?<sup>2</sup> That rings a bell, like the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

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<sup>1</sup> On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. (1 Corinthians 16:2).

How do we give? We get control of our lives. We set our priorities. We get control of our time, so we have time to give. We get control of our finances, if we haven't already. As Jeff said, we live like no one else so we can give like no one else. We examine our spending, both our time and our money. How we spend our time and money is a moral and ethical choice we make, a choice we all make every single day.

As a reminder of the choices you make, you have been given a credit or debit card sleeve today. Something to give you pause when you are planning to pull out your wallet. If nothing else, it slows you down, getting the card out of that sleeve. If you want to know the truth, it's a bit of a pain, a pain that I for one am glad to experience. I want to be reminded I am making ethical and moral choices when I spend money.

Next week we are asked to pledge our time **and** money for the work of this church. We pledge so the church may plan. The goal this year is 100% pledging! The goal is also to meet the ministry needs envisioned by the committees of the church. We've been asked for \$405,000. And we believe God will help us do this. We have also been asked to give the gift of time. For everyone to pledge to participate some way in the work of the church. If we have to, we will ask more than once.

Charlie Wallace taught me that not only is it okay to ask for money for the things you believe in, it is absolutely essential! I am proud and happy to join you, and to ask you to give—to pledge--for something we all believe in! That something is the life and work of LHPC---its worship, its caring, its Child Development Center, Sandwich ministry, Meals on Wheels, Presbyterian Children's Homes, TYC, Project GIFT, Recovery Inc., Christian Fellowship Ministries, Iglesia Cristiana. . . and new things will spring up next year from seeds we have ordered but not yet planted. New things like a Clean Water Project, Missionpalooza, expanded scholarships, better care for members!

We won't pass around a straw hat next week, but I have a sneaking feeling that Charlie Wallace will be laughing when we all come forward to the table with our promises and our pledges. When we come skipping down the aisle with our our promises, ready to let loose, joyously, happily, with a spring in our step and hope in our eyes. When we come slowly to the banquet table and lay down the first of what we have, the cream of our crop, there will be laughter and rejoicing not just in heaven, but here, in us, the sowers of God's seeds.

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<sup>2</sup> People who earn less than \$30,000 a year give 6% to charity while people who earn \$100-\$200,000 a year give only 2%. Above the \$200,000 level, it is even less.