

World Stewardship Day

2nd December 2017

Givers in All Season

Introduction

There are seasons of life when we are more inclined to give than during others. When we feel blessed or when we have received abundantly the propensity to give is generally higher. However, when money is tight and the challenges and obligations are many, we might hesitate to give to the Lord and to others. Solomon, in Proverbs 21:26b, sets regular giving, giving in all seasons, as the ideal for believers: *“the righteous give without sparing.”* There is a group of believers, the Macedonians, who adopted the ideal of giving in all seasons. How was this achieved? How did they give?

(Prayer)

Part I: The Need for a General Collection

Alongside with his preaching ministry Apostle Paul orchestrated an initiative of collection across the entire Christian Church. We have some details in 1 Corinthians 16:1 and 16:3. *“Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.” “Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.”*

The Christians of Jewish background were facing a serious challenge. There was a severe famine in the area around Jerusalem in Judea. We read in Acts 11:27-30: *“And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹ Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.”*

The purpose of the collection was to bring relief to God's people in Judea, who were suffering badly. The Apostle Paul, though he defines himself as the apostle of the gentiles, was very concerned and want to bring relief to the Christians of Jewish origin. This is an example of solidarity; the Early Church was united not only in the Word but also in caring for each other beyond cultural and national boundaries. This practice stands in contrast to the tendency among some to give generosity and support only for those who are near, whom we can see and can benefit from. This was generosity without selfish motivation.

A closer examination of Acts 11:27-30 tells us that the collection was not only for the purpose of relief. The famine was not limited to Jerusalem in Judea but extended "*throughout all the world*", most probably throughout the Roman empire. The need for relief was everywhere but Paul pleaded in a specific way for the Church in Jerusalem. What could be the reason? The role played by the Church in Jerusalem, the mother church as it were, can explain this special consideration. The Jerusalem Church played a vital spiritual, administrative and missionary role in the nascent Christian Church. The contributions of all the churches for Jerusalem was therefore not only for relief but to ensure that the Church in Jerusalem could pursue its God-given assignment of acting as the governing body.

In our management of our God-given resources, we also have a double obligation: caring for the needy and supporting the advancement of God's cause. Many are fortunate not to live in places of famine, but the poor and needy will be always with us (Matt 28:14; Mk 14:7). An unknown author wrote these words about our social responsibility: "*If your Christianity is all in your head and not in your hands, then it isn't worth much.*" It is also clear that "*God has placed in the hands of his servants the means to carry forward his work in home and foreign mission*" (*The Review and Herald*, Dec. 23, 1890).

We read in 2 Corinthians 8:10b about the first response of the Church in Corinth to the appeal of Paul, "*Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so*". However,

the passage of time seems to have eroded the disposition of the Corinthians to give. In 2 Corinthians 9:3-5, Paul expresses some concern about the readiness of the Church for the next collection. We do not know precisely what has happened in the meantime. The fact is that the change of year or season has brought a change in the disposition of the believers to give to the Church in Jerusalem. Here Paul is pleading for them to be givers in all seasons. How do we rise above the level of an emotional, occasional, circumstantial giver to the standard of a lifelong giver, a systematic giver?

Part II: The Grace of God

As a means of stirring up the motivation of the Church in Corinth, instead of making an appeal, Paul shares about the example set by the Macedonians and the power to give in all seasons. Testimonies and examples sometimes speak louder than sermons and appeals. This is the rationale behind our Sabbath School mission stories.

We read in 2 Corinthians 8:1: *“Moreover, brethren, we make known to you **the grace of God** bestowed on the churches of Macedonia.”* Macedonia was in the northern part of present-day Greece. Paul had established churches in the Macedonian cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

The main theme of this section is the generosity of the churches in Macedonia. Interestingly, Paul starts with what they have received, *“the grace of God”*, not with what they have given. Paul is telling to the people of Corinth that the Macedonians are recipients of God’s grace, of God’s gifts. What have they received as gifts from God? Have they received some material goodies which explain their generosity? Not necessarily.

The gift that they have received is, firstly, the giving spirit, the spirit of generosity and liberality. Fallen human beings are naturally self-centred and selfish, whatever be the extent of their

resources. The devil is so convinced of this reality that he dared ask this question to God about the famous patriarch in Job 1:9, *“Does Job fear God for nothing?”* We are inclined to do things for benefit; to gain or retain something. The Macedonians gave of their own not because they were “superhero” givers, but because God imparted this ability into them, that was His grace to them. It was the same grace that turned Zacchaeus into the most generous man in Jericho. God gives us the power to give.

It is also worth noting that the same word “grace” is used to describe the gift or donation or contribution given by the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:6,7; 2 Cor. 9:8; 1 Cor. 16:3). The grace of God is a necessity if we want to be a source of grace for others. The opportunity to give, the inclination to give and the actual giving are all gifts of grace from God.

To help his readers appreciate the effect of God’s grace on the Macedonians, Paul describes the providential experience through which these believers have gone. We read in 2 Corinthians 8:2, *“That in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality.”* This passage is built on two beautiful contrasts. Firstly, the great trial is a reference to the persecution that the Macedonians had to endure because of their faith. It refers to the harassment God’s people receive from the world. Instead of being brought to despair by their circumstances, they enjoyed an abundance of happiness. This is the power of God’s grace. Secondly, the trial led the Macedonians into “deep poverty” which means literally “down-to-the-depth poverty”. It is well known that Macedonia was a rich and flourishing region in the Roman empire. In this context, the poverty of the believers of Macedonia was even more painful to bear. However, according to Paul, despite their lack of resources, the Macedonians were wealthy in generosity. This is the power of God’s grace.

What was the reason for their joy? We read in Acts 20:35, *“And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”* There is joy in giving. A recent research study done by six scientists of the University of Zurich (*Nature Communications*, 11 July

2017) established that there is a direct correlation between generosity and happiness. The MRI of the participants who were planning to give showed that the zone in the brain associated with happiness was more active than in the other group that had not made the decision to give.

On the other hand, the people of Corinth were finding it hard to continue to give. Paul's teaching about *"the grace of God"* represents a source of encouragement for all believers. He acknowledges that it is somehow normal not to always feel good about giving. Being generous is not in sync with our nature as humans. The grace of God had transformed the poor-persecuted Macedonians into joyful, extravagant givers. The power to give in all seasons is real and effective.

The grace that was active among the Macedonians is accessible for each one of us. Paul writes these words in Ephesians 4:7, *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift."* Christ paid the full price for the gift of grace. How can you and I access this grace? We read in 2 Corinthians 8:5, *"And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."* The Macedonians first submitted themselves to God's authority and care. Thus, they were made capable of accomplishing the will of God, the Greatest Giver. Ellen White describes the source of the giving power of the Macedonians in these words: *"The willingness to sacrifice on the part of Macedonian believers came **as a result** of wholehearted consecration"* (*Acts of the Apostles*, p.343). When we consecrate ourselves fully to God, He overcomes the selfishness in us. The fear of giving is chased away by the conviction that God is the Provider.

Part III: The Macedonian model of giving

After sharing about the power to give that the Macedonians received from God, Paul provides details about how the Macedonians gave. This is presented as an ideal for believers in Corinth and for believers in all generations. We read in 2 Corinthians 8:3,4 *"For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints."*

According to their ability

They evaluated their giving not in terms of the amount that they gave but based on what they had received. They did not compare themselves with others in giving. When others are seen as giving a large amount, we might conclude that it is not important for us to give. When others are seen as giving a small amount, we might conclude that we are giving too much. Ultimately, when one gets involved in the comparison game, one ends up giving less than one is really capable of giving. We are called to calculate our offerings in proportion, as a percentage of our income, this is to give according to our ability.

Beyond their ability

They did not give after attending to their needs. It was not out of their surplus. It is improbable that they even had a surplus! They gave sacrificially, not comfortably. Ellen White encourages this same attitude in Christians:

“And the absence of self-denial in His professed followers, God regards as a denial of the Christian name. Those who profess to be one with Christ, and indulge their selfish desires for rich and expensive clothing, furniture, and food, are Christians only in name. To be a Christian is to be Christlike.” (*Review & Herald, Oct. 13, 1896*) To make this statement relevant for today, we may have to add some other items to the list beyond clothing, furniture and food. The secret of giving “*beyond one’s ability*” is to put giving first on our spending list and to operate with a personal or family budget.

Freely willing

Giving is the result of a choice, a decision. It is done neither out of compulsion nor based on emotion. It is wrong to think that a freewill offering means that it is acceptable for the believer

to choose not to give. Freewill offering consists of giving, according to the prompting of a revived heart, a proportion of our income. It is not felt as a pressure.

Appeal to participate

Giving was perceived by the Macedonians as a privilege that they should not miss. They did not complain because of another appeal but saw this situation as a recurring opportunity to partner with God.

Conclusion

Being a giver in all seasons is not something natural for human beings. It is, however, the standard for those who have experienced the righteousness of Christ: *“the righteous gives without sparing.”* God imparts the grace of giving to those who submit to His leading. Like the Macedonians, we too can be transformed into generous and joyful givers.

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