

GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

NO CATCHY SLOGANS *by Emma Crossen*

Materials you may want

Bible, open to 2 Corinthians 8-9

Note pad for yourself

One easel or large board for someone to take notes during the group discussion

Opening hymn

“We all are one in mission” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 576)

Focus verse

2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

In this session, we’ll look at Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, from which we get one of the most succinct and upbeat slogans about giving: “God loves a cheerful giver.”

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you’re a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow 5 minutes for discussion.

What rule about giving do we often take from this passage? How do you feel about this rule? Do you follow it?

“God loves a cheerful giver.” It’s short and upbeat. It fits nicely on a pew envelope or thank-you card, and it makes a memorable sermon title.

It doesn’t tell us what to do. The sentence is not a command. Rather it reminds us of God’s preference. Yet, as the phrase is used, it usually carries a tone of criticism or condescension toward another person. Today, “cheerful” usually refers to someone who is openly happy and optimistic. It’s one thing to feel cheerful. It’s another thing to be told to feel cheerful. “God loves a cheerful giver” usually implies that “You’re not being cheerful enough,” “You should be happier,” or “Stop worrying and enjoy giving away your money.”

Cheerful, willing, and eager

The Greek word translated as “cheerful” is *hilaron*. 2 Corinthians 9:7 is its only appearance in the Bible. In the society in which Paul wrote, the word *hilaria* was used to designate festival days. The idea of amusement and celebration resonates with our contemporary understanding of cheerful. If we read verse 7 in its entirety, we see another dynamic implied by *hilaron*.

Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul contrasts “cheerful” with “reluctant” and “under compulsion.” A cheerful giver, then, is one who gives willingly and eagerly.

So we can change the slogan to “God loves a will-

ing and eager giver.” Even with this additional explanation, the slogan still sounds somewhat condescending. It’s one thing to be willing and eager. It’s another thing to be told to be willing and eager. It still puts the burden on *you*, the giver, to have the right attitude about your gift. Donors bring legitimate concerns to their giving. Is Paul dismissing these concerns? Is he saying, “Cheer up. Don’t worry about it. Just give. Be happy.”

Of course, it should come as no surprise that Paul was not writing a catchy slogan. He probably did not intend his words to be used 2,000 years later as a general rule about giving. To the contrary, he was writing to a specific group—the church in Corinth—to evoke a specific response about a specific gift: a collection of money for the church in Jerusalem.

A gift for Jerusalem

2 Corinthians is addressed to “the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia” (2 Corinthians 1:1) and was probably written around 57 C.E. Paul founded the church in Corinth approximately five years prior to writing this letter. During that time, he wrote an earlier letter to the church, which appears in the New Testament as 1 Corinthians. He also visited the church at least once. At the beginning of 2 Corinthians, he refers to this as a “painful visit” and urges the church to forgive the person in their community who caused the pain (2 Corinthians 2:5–8).

Paul has a long history with the church at Corinth when he writes 2 Corinthians. Our focus verse comes from chapters 8–9, in which Paul is writing about a specific monetary collection called the “ministry for the saints.”

This collection was a major project in Paul’s ministry. He mobilized several Gentile churches, including those at Corinth and Macedonia, to take a special collection over several years to benefit the church in Jerusalem. Paul wrote about this offering:

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 16:1–4

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

Jerusalem was the capital of Judea, a region largely populated by Jews but under the authority of the Roman Empire. Judea is where Jesus carried out his ministry. The church in Jerusalem was made up of Jewish Christians. Though he devoted his ministry to building churches among the Gentiles, Paul had a special concern for the Jerusalem church. In his writings to the Gentile churches, which make up much of the New Testament, Paul suggests that the Gentiles owe a debt of gratitude or compensation for the spiritual blessings that the Jewish Christians gave them.

In writing about the “ministry for the saints” Paul says: *At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15:25–27)*

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s return to 2 Corinthians 8–9, which was written before the offering was complete. In 2 Corinthians 8:1, Paul says that the Macedonian church has already turned over its offering. In the next two chapters, Paul reveals that he is concerned that the church at Corinth won’t follow through on its portion of the offering. This is the context in which he writes, “God loves a cheerful giver.” In chapters 8 and 9, Paul shows why he is concerned and

what he's doing to make sure the gift happens.

Talk about it

Read out loud each set of verses and, as a group, answer the corresponding question.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:3–5.

What steps is Paul taking to make sure the Corinthians are ready to turn over their offering for Jerusalem? Why is he concerned?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16–19.

Who are the brothers whom Paul refers to in 9:3?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–8.

Why does Paul mention the church in Macedonia in his letter to the church in Corinth?

Persuading the Corinthians

This portion of the letter is an excellent example of rhetoric, or writing intended to persuade and impress Paul's audience. Paul is not just communicating the facts—he is playing to the emotions of the Corinthian church. Specifically, he appeals to their pride and competitive spirit. He starts by making sure they know that the Macedonian church has already turned over its part of the offering. Paul says, “Their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (8:2). He appeals to the Corinthians' pride by praising them for their spiritual gifts and, in the same sentence, points out that the Macedonians exceed them in producing material offerings. “We want you to excel also in this generous undertaking” (8:7).

Lest the Corinthians feel inferior, Paul gives them credit for the Macedonians' generosity. In 9:2, he says he has been bragging to the Macedonians about the Corinthians' eagerness and that “your zeal has stirred up most of them.” Even so, Paul goes on to explain

that he is sending the brothers ahead to make sure the Corinthians follow through. “Otherwise,” Paul says, “if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you” (2 Corinthians 9:4).

By praising the Corinthians and comparing them to the Macedonians, Paul is using rhetoric to evoke a specific response. He wants the Corinthians to give willingly and eagerly when he arrives with the Macedonians to collect the offering and take it to Jerusalem.

Talk about it

In small groups, respond to these questions:

What do you think about Paul's message? Have you ever been part of a group that pledged to make a donation to another group? Was there any disagreement about whether to proceed? How would your group have reacted to receiving a letter like this?

Moving on from 2 Corinthians 9:5, Paul's rhetoric turns toward God. He moves away from the logistical details (that is, sending the brothers) and the relationship between Paul, the Macedonians, and the Corinthians. In 9:6–15, he focuses on what this collection means to God and how God's laws are revealed through the collection.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6–15

This is where our catchy slogan appears: “God loves a cheerful giver.” In the context of the large passage, we can see that Paul is using this general statement about God to evoke a particular reaction from the Corinthians. He wants them to follow through on the collection for Jerusalem so they don't embarrass him or themselves. Paul is not saying, “Always be willing to give, no matter what.” Rather, “God loves a cheerful giver” is a form of rhetoric intended to persuade a group within his community about an offering that was important to the entire community.

We're in this together

As a catchy slogan, “God loves a cheerful giver” is usually aimed at the individual giver. We use this slogan to encourage individuals to give joyfully, eagerly, or willingly. The burden of giving cheerfully falls on the individual.

When we use it this way, we miss a critical dynamic in Paul’s writing. On every level, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, “We’re in this together. Your gift to Jerusalem is part of a larger ministry to the saints. And I am going to do whatever it takes to make sure that we all follow through on this important ministry.” In saying to Corinth, “Don’t let me down,” he’s also saying, “I won’t let you fail.”

Talk about it

In pairs, look at the following verses to answer these questions:

How is Paul showing the Corinthians that their offering is part of a shared project, that the whole community values the gifts they bring, and that the whole community is behind them?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–4

2 CORINTHIANS 8:16–24

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1–5

Last session, we looked at the story of the widow’s mite. We asked this question: What if Jesus is less concerned with individual generosity and more concerned with how the community uses its resources to care for the poor? What if the measure of an individual’s giving is found not only in how much she gives, but in whether she is holding her community accountable to use all its gifts appropriately?

It seems, here, that Paul shares the same concern. He models a leadership that looks at the whole community to identify where the need is greatest and to hold all members accountable for giving what they can

to meet that need.

Paul is leading and teaching his Gentile churches, spread throughout a geographic area, to understand themselves as part of the same body of Christ, each with gifts to bring to enhance the common good. He wants each of these churches to understand themselves as part of a single body with a responsibility to share their resources to care for those in greatest need among them.

Unity is a major theme of Paul’s ministry. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit....

The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13, 21–26)

In 2 Corinthians 8–9, we see the lengths to which Paul will go as a leader to ensure this happens. Yes, God loves a cheerful giver. Paul shows us, however, that the burden for giving cheerfully is not on the individual. The burden is on the community to structure its offerings and encourage its members in such a way that they are willing and eager to give of what they have to care for one another.

Talk about it

What are the factors that prevent you from giving cheerfully, without reservation? Make a list.

How can your church community help to address those concerns?

Prayer

God of Corinth, Macedonia, Jerusalem and (your city) _____, thank you for these letters of Paul that show how you have been present with your church through the ages. Help us to make our congregations into communities where we challenge and accompany each other to be willing and eager to give. In your name, Amen. 🌿

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Limits of Wealth

In a detailed study of the role of money in the early church, church historian Justo González summarizes the relation of faith to wealth in Christianity's first three centuries. Those were the centuries before the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Empire and made it fashionable for the rich and powerful to become Christian. Gonzalez tells a story that is absent from most of our textbooks; the values he recounts are preserved today mostly in the monastic tradition, with its emphasis on the limits of wealth. Here are some of the limits placed on wealth by the early church as Gonzalez enumerates them:

1. Lending money with interest is universally condemned;
2. In giving to the poor, a Christian is lending God's own money back to God;
3. Money is not evil but it should not be accumulated or loved for itself;
4. Private property is OK but it should not be abused;
5. One should keep for oneself only what is necessary for life and all the rest, which is superfluous, should be given to the poor,

because all property ultimately belongs to God and we have done nothing to deserve it; money is a gift of grace;

6. To accumulate wealth is to pervert it, and to keep wealth is to be a thief.
7. Ten percent is the bare minimum that one must give; and, finally,
8. Some communities demanded that the rich give up all of their wealth to become Christian.

Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. (Wipf and Stock, 1990), pp. 226-229.

Questions for discussion

Which of these principles are ignored by today's wealth-oriented society, with its focus on an individual's ownership and use of private property?

Do any of these principles demand that poor people give out of their poverty?

Do these principles center on individual donors or are they more communal, as is Paul's appeal in 2 Corinthians?