

COLLECTING FOR THE SAINTS: GIFTS OVERFLOWING

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2 Corinthians 9:6-15

We are here in church, and so if I say the name Zacchaeus, the first thing that pops into your head is probably “wee little man.” We know the children’s song and how it tells us that Zacchaeus climbed a tree in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus. We assume that he wasn’t tall enough to see over the crowd. You’re singing the song in your head right now, aren’t you?

Zacchaeus lived in the city of Jericho and was the chief tax collector for that region. As chief tax collector, he was likely a despised human being. Although he was Jewish, the Jews would have viewed him as a Roman collaborator since he took the people’s money and gave it to the Empire. It is also likely that he overtaxed the people and pocketed the excess for himself. That was the practice at the time.

At some point, Zacchaeus experienced a transformation in his life. It’s not clear if it was when Jesus came to Jericho or some time before. But Jesus is aware of this change and when he spots Zacchaeus up in the tree, Jesus says to him, *Get down here, for I must visit you at your home today.* While Zacchaeus was happy to see Jesus, the people who viewed this all grumbled wondering why Jesus would hang out with this obvious reprobate.

Once at his house, Zacchaeus informs Jesus that he is giving one-half of all of his possessions to the poor. And, if he has defrauded anyone, he will compensate them four times the amount that he took. In response, Jesus blesses Zacchaeus telling him that, *Today, salvation has come into this house.*

I was reminded of the Zacchaeus story for how it contrasts with another story from the gospels—the story of the wealthy man who comes to Jesus asking how he might obtain eternal life. In other words, salvation. The man informs Jesus that he has kept God’s laws and always led a righteous life. Jesus tells him that there is just one more thing to do, he must sell all that he owns and give the money to the poor. Then, he can follow Jesus. The man responds that can’t do this. He can’t part with his possessions.

For the past two weeks, I’ve been preaching this sermon series called “Collecting for the Saints.” In this series, I have focused on the collection gathered by the Apostle Paul in the first century. For ten years, Paul collected money from the churches that he had founded, and he sent this money back to the church headquarters in Jerusalem to be distributed to the poor.

Two weeks ago, we looked at Paul’s instructions for taking up a collection within the congregation. You will remember that Paul told the church at Corinth

that they must make giving a habit. Each person should set aside an amount every week for the collection. When he arrived, they would arrange for the money to be taken to Jerusalem.

Last Sunday, we looked at how generosity can be contagious. Giving inspires giving.

Today, I want to conclude this series by looking at the encouraging words of Paul to the church at Corinth on the spiritual rewards of giving.

Last week, I asked the question, "Why should Christians give?" We should give because we are grateful. Giving should be our faithful response to God for God's gifts of life and love.

For today, we continue reading from the book known as Second Corinthians. This book is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christian church in the city of Corinth. Paul had founded this church some years earlier. And in his letter, he addresses a number of issues confronting the church. He also includes his appeal for the collection he is gathering, a collection he calls the "Collection for the Saints." The folk at the Corinth church had fallen behind on their giving. They started out strong, but their commitment waned and they're giving has dropped. Paul is writing to encourage them to resume the habit of giving.

In our reading for today, Paul is making the argument that generosity has its rewards. He begins with an old saying, *The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.* In other words, if a farmer places just one seed in a field, he will get one plant. If he sows 1000 seeds—if he sows bountifully—he will have 1000 plants—he will reap bountifully.

Sadly, too many preachers have taken this idea and abused it with the false claim that monetary gifts to God through the church will be rewarded with increased wealth to the giver. If a person gives \$1,000 to the church, then God will enrich them two times, 10 times, even 50 times. This is an intoxicating message. It preys on the poor and the powerless. Furthermore, if the person gives and the wealth is not returned, then the person is told that they must lack faith. It is insidious.

But this is not what Paul (or I) is trying to say here. Nowhere does Paul promise such a financial return. But he does talk about blessings and enrichment, blessings in abundance.

The word abundance is used here as it is throughout all of scripture. Our lives of faith should be lived in abundance. We should rejoice in abundance, love in abundance, show compassion in abundance, and give in abundance. Once, when Jesus was teaching about forgiveness, Peter asked if it was enough to forgive

someone seven times. Jesus said, No, you must be willing to forgive 77 times. Forgiveness should be abundant. We should love in abundance as God has loved us.

So exactly how much is Paul asking the people at Corinth to give? Is he demanding a percentage of their pretax income? Is it a percentage of their real property? No. He tells them to give what they have decided to give. He says, *Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* God is not interested in our money. God is interested in our hearts.

When I was younger, I was in the Boy Scouts. I was a member of Troop 2 down in Mobile, Alabama. My dad had been a member of Troop 1. My dad never attained the rank of Eagle Scout, so he made darned sure that I did. And I am grateful for that. Being a Boy Scout taught me many things. Being a scout molded me. And each year, I give money to the Boy Scouts of Middle Tennessee out of gratitude. I actually look forward to writing that check. I am thankful for all that Scouting gave me and I want more kids to share what I have. I don't know what happens to the money I donate. I don't care. It may become a part of someone's salary; it may be used to pay the utilities at the headquarters in Nashville. I trust them to use it wisely to continue the work of Scouting.

Another issue that Paul addresses in this letter is the fear we all have that if we give money away then we will not have enough for ourselves. Paul points out that God not only blesses us but provides blessing and abundance. God provides that we will have enough of what we need. As Paul writes, *He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.*

Think about the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable, a man is attacked by robbers and left for dead on an empty road. No one would help him except this man from Samaria who stops and cares for the man. The Samaritan takes the man to an inn to recover. The Samaritan pays the innkeeper to watch over the man and tells him that he will return and will pay for any additional expenses. The Samaritan was generous. He committed himself to future, unknown expenses.

This week, a letter was sent to each of you asking for you to make a pledge to the church for 2023. This pledge can be for any amount. I say, of course, the more the better. But I implore you to give cheerfully, to give with joy, to give for the for the feeling it gives you, the feeling of participation in God's plan for salvation.

Do you remember Zacchaeus? He gave to the poor out of the joy of the salvation that he found in God through Jesus. His life was transformed. His relationship with God was renewed. So, he responded with generosity and abundance. On the other

hand, there was the wealthy man who considered himself righteous because he followed God's law. He was seeking salvation but lacked the faith to part with his wealth. Which one was truly closer to God? Which one felt God's blessings in abundance? Which one do we choose to be?

Today, we are recognizing All Saints Day. In a few moments, we will lift up those members of our church who have died in the past year. But each of us will also remember in our hearts the saints of our own lives. And if there is one common trait connecting all these Saints, it would be the trait of generosity. No one has ever said, "You remember that miserly, stingy man, or that woman who never gave anything to anyone? Boy were they a saint. No. We look back at the saints for all the good they did for us and for other people. They freely and cheerfully gave of their time and their money and their love to help others. The saints are those who give generously.

One of the names on our list of saints is Carol Simon. Most of you did not get a chance to meet Carol. She died on October 24, quietly in her sleep, just two weeks after transferring her membership to this church from her church in Florida. Her funeral will be held here on Wednesday.

But I wanted to tell you about Carol. She was a nurse. And in her retirement, she gave of herself as a volunteer at hospice. She was even recognized as a volunteer of the year. She gave of herself to those on the precipice of death. She was generous; she was a saint; and like all of our saints, she will be missed.