

It has been said in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way that a Christian must undergo three conversions. The first is in the head, where we come to learn of our Savior Jesus and believe that he died to save us. These are things we now know. The second is in the heart, where we are filled with love and thankfulness over what our God has done for us, and that then pours out in every area of our lives. We are no longer content to simply know we are saved at this point, our love for God has to show itself. The third conversion is in the wallet, when we finally reach the point that we trust God enough to give up our last earthly safety blanket, our own wealth.

Now again, this is tongue-in-cheek. In truth we are only converted once. After that point we grow in our lives of living for God and as we grow in the Holy Spirit we get better at living the way God wants of us. It just happens that most people tend to reach the stages of Christian growth in that order. But because many people tend to reach that stage of giving freely later on in their growth, the topic of Christian giving tends to be a minefield of trouble when you wander into it. But many of the negative reactions we tend to have over Christian giving stem from misunderstanding what it's all about and what God actually wants of us. We let our selfish natures get the better of us, so once we hear God talking to us about giving we close our ears and we make assumptions about God or the church based on the same selfishness we feel. So let's confront that all head-on today and talk about what it means to give as a Christian and what God expects of us. To help us understand this, we turn to the Apostle Paul in our reading from 2 Corinthians 9: <read text 2 Co 9:8-11>.

To understand giving properly we first have to start with what we have. I think we all intellectually know the answer to this question: "Where does all we have come from?" We would all answer, "From God." But do we really think of it that way when we go home and look at all we have? When we check the balance of our checking account? Would we do well to read through the Small Catechism every morning as Luther made his habit, particularly here the explanation to the first article of the creed that we so quickly forget? Where Luther explains, "**I believe that God created me and all that exists, and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities. And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life. God also preserves me by defending me against all danger, guarding and protecting me from all evil. All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it. For all this I ought to thank and praise, to serve and obey him.**"

That last half is just as important to our understanding as the first. It's one thing to recognize that all we have comes from God, it's another to recognize that he owes us none of it. Sometimes when God takes away from us or doesn't give us as much as we think we should have, we react as though he is somehow failing in his job, as though he owes us these things. He does not. As people who have broken his law more times than can be counted, we are not owed one crust of bread, one ounce of strength or even one more breath in this world. It is the merciful God who gives to us anyway. He is the one who has "**scattered abroad his gifts to the poor.**" We do not deserve his daily gifts any more than we deserved that greatest gift; the life of his Son who paid for all our guilt.

When we remember how God bled and died for us and freely given us the gift of eternal life already, when we recognize that all we have is an undeserved gift from his hand and when we remember our natural state without God, then we're ready to understand the principle of stewardship. Oh "stewardship". That's just a code word the church uses these days when they want to talk about our offerings without saying so, right? No. Granted, "steward" isn't really a word you hear in conversation much anymore, but its meaning perfectly describes what we're talking about. A steward is a kind of caretaker. He is given control of something that is not his. It could be stuff or money or authority. But he cannot just use it how he wants. As steward, it is his burden to care for and use those things as he thinks the owner would. In that way he is something like an ambassador or representative as well. He is given a charge over something that is not his and he is to use it and care for it in the owner's stead.

Do you see how that applies to the things we have? We do not own anything of our own. Everything you have, every treasure, every toy, every dollar, every ability, every *moment* is given to you by God. They are all his, and you are charged with using and caring for them on his behalf. You do not own your little kingdom on earth. You are merely a steward. Unfortunately it is not in our nature to use these things as God would, by nature we don't even know *how* to do so. And so talking about Christian stewardship means learning how to use and care for all we have in the ways God wants.

This is a much broader topic than just giving our regular offerings. In fact much of the Pentecost season deals with how we use what God gives us to his glory, we just don't always use that term "stewardship". But today we are talking about giving, because that's one of the primary purposes God gives so much to us, as the Apostle writes in our section

today, **“You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.”** (v11). To show God thanks for all he has done for us is one of the primary joys of a Christian life. To be set free from the selfish burden of hoarding and to give freely to God of all we have, not just our money, is a joy unlike any other in this life. And God wants you to have that joy, he wants you to have that blessing.

Did you ever go shopping with your mom to buy your dad a present when you were little? Maybe she gave you a little direction on what Dad would like, but you picked something out for him and you took it home and wrapped it carefully, maybe even made a card to go with it, and then you gave it to Dad on his birthday or at Christmas. Ah, and it was so exciting to see him open it, to be surprised by it and to see that it really was something he wanted. And when he looked to you and said “thank you”, it just warms the heart. It made you feel great to have done that for Dad.

But back up a little. Who paid for that? Well, Mom had the money at check-out time, but she wasn't the one who earned the money, she was busy watching you every day. Dad was the one who went to work every day, Dad was the one who brought the paycheck home...didn't Dad really just buy himself a present? Well, sheesh, why bother? Why didn't he just go out and get himself what he wanted for his birthday? Why even let you in the loop? Because both of you, father and child enjoyed it. You enjoyed giving to Dad, even if it wasn't really “yours”, you enjoyed giving him a good gift that he would really like, that you put thought into. And Dad enjoyed getting from you, not the gift itself, he could've bought that anyway. No, he enjoyed that you loved him enough to give it to him.

This is exactly how giving works with our Heavenly Father. We give him nothing he doesn't already have. He provides the means and the opportunity for us to give. The joy on both ends is not so much in what is given, but that you love God enough to give him something he wants, something good that you put thought and effort into. And God himself has joy in seeing how much you love him. This is why we give of what we have, and this is why God asks us to give, that we both can have the joy of this experience.

Of course, consider for a moment how this could be abused. If all that matters is that you give something, then it doesn't matter what, right? What if instead of taking you shopping, Mom handed you a twenty and set you loose in the store? And then come Christmas time, Dad unwraps a 50-cent pack of gum from you? Or even worse we say, “I couldn't get you anything,” because we selfishly pocketed the money that we were given for this gift. How often have we done that to God? God gives to us generously so that we can know the joy of giving to him, but we skimp on the gift or just don't give because we insist we don't have enough to offer him anything?

God gives to us what are meant to give back to him purely so that we can know this joy of giving. When we give to the Lord in our time or our talents and particularly our treasures, this is why we give. To thank the Lord. To show him we love him. To show him our appreciation and our trust that he will continue to provide. We don't give to cause an earthly outcome. We don't give because “the church needs money”. We human beings want to see a direct correlation, cause and effect. We put money in the offering plate, the church spends it. But that's not how God sees it. We give purely in thanks and only to our Lord. Our Lord in his wisdom gives funds to the congregation so that in can continue to carry out his work. Sometimes the congregation is short on funds. That is in God's hands. Sometimes it has a surplus. That too is in God's hands. Neither should change our offering to the Lord. Our gifts to the Lord are determined by what he has given to us and always given generously, motivated purely out of thanks to him.

Do take note of that part there. Our gifts are determined by what God gives us. Sometimes we stray too far in the other direction when it comes to giving. Sometimes as our health fails we feel guilty that we can't do as much for God as we used to. Sometimes as our economic situation shifts we feel guilty that we can't give as much as some others. But again, who gave to you, and who took it away? Do you really think the Lord expects from you MORE than he has given you? Of course not. If Mom gave you twenty to spend on Dad's Christmas present, he's not going to be disappointed that you didn't buy him a new snowmobile.

The same is true of our God. Don't get caught up in what you don't have. You have what God has decided you should have. In that, God has given you enough that you will have some to give back. How much is between you and God. At some stages of life it may only be time that you can spend in prayer, or your talents you can give to the ministry or it may only be a regular offering you can make. Whatever it is, you have something from God that you can give back to him; time and talents and treasures that he deliberately gave to you that you could have the joy of giving it back to him in love and thanks.

Brothers and sisters you have what you were meant to give. Remember your Lord who loves you, who died for you, and who gives you every day without your earning or deserving. In his grace he has given you the ability to show your love and thanks to him through many gifts. Let go of the burden of selfishness and freely give to the Lord what he has given to you. Amen.