

Free-hearted Liberty

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Speaking generally, we are safe in saying that there is no danger in current Christianity of overlooking the money question. The appeals for money are too loud and too frequent, and the methods adopted in order to obtain it are frequently so questionable, if not so utterly worldly, that the whole thing has become a scandal. Thirty years ago we remember seeing an anti-religious cartoon satirising the discord and contention which exists between the various sects of Christendom, and underneath were printed words to this effect: "The one point upon which they are all agreed: 'Now concerning the collection' (1 Cor. 16: 1)." Because of the large measure of truth there was in it this was the most stinging point of the satire.

What is in danger of being overlooked is the spirit and attitude and action of the saints of God where giving in relation to the interests of the Lord is concerned. The incessant cry for money may very easily provoke a reaction in our minds and lead to a careless and indifferent spirit on the subject, so that the genuine claims of the Lord are neglected. It is worthy of note that the Spirit of God has been pleased to give us two whole chapters in the New Testament dealing with this matter, besides allusions to it in sundry other passages. We refer to 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

In these chapters the apostle Paul was dealing with the specific matter of the collection on behalf of the poor saints at Jerusalem, to which he had alluded in the first epistle and also in the epistle to the Romans; consequently he does not touch upon giving to the Lord's servants for the spread of the gospel or the work of the ministry generally. Other Scriptures deal with this side of things, notably the epistle to the Philippians, who are praised by the apostle for their "fellowship in the Gospel from the first day until now." He does, however, take advantage of this specific matter to unfold the general principles which govern all Christian giving, and hence we have before us here instructions of abiding importance.

First of all in point of importance comes

THE MOTIVE,

for if this be wrong, all is wrong, no matter how much may be given. Giving must spring from the right source, it must draw its motive force from a worthy direction. What that direction is the apostle

indicates in 2 Corinthians 8: 9, saying: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." The grace of the Lord Jesus operating upon our hearts, produces its own effects in the way of the grace of giving and every other Christian grace. He becomes to us the fountain head of these things, so that even in this sense we rightly sing:

"Lord Jesus, source of every grace,
Glorious in light divine."

At first sight we are inclined to exclaim, "But how great a lever for producing an apparently small result!" Yet is it not ever thus in Scripture? The weightiest considerations are brought to bear upon the simplest details of the Christian's daily life. On second thoughts, however, we perceive that the result is not so small after all. Nothing is more ingrained in man's fallen nature than selfishness, and it was this that accounted for the sluggish action of the Corinthians. When the subject of this collection for the poor saints first came up they willingly agreed to give; the apostle could speak of "the forwardness of your mind" (2 Cor. 9: 2), and consequently he boasted of them to others, "that Achaia was ready a year ago;" **yet** though there was this willingness in mind and word there was delay in action, and the thing so far had not materialised. There was "a readiness to will," but they did not readily "perform the doing of it" out of that which they had (2 Cor. 8: 11). What could stir their sluggish hearts — or ours — so effectually as a fresh sense of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?

In this we have a motive which is absolutely perfect, yet even so the apostle thought it well to inform the Corinthians of something which he knew would also stir them, and act as just

THE STIMULUS

they needed. He turns their thoughts to the extraordinary generosity which had marked the Macedonian believers, amongst whom would be numbered the Philippians; indeed, he opens up the whole subject in this second epistle by referring to them.

Several circumstances combined to make the giving of the Macedonians very noteworthy. First, they were *very poor*; the apostle speaks of their "deep poverty." Second, they were *very persecuted*, for they were in "a great trial of affliction." Third, they were *very joyful*, since he alludes to "the abundance of their joy."

Now here we have a combination of things which would never suggest itself to the average man of the world. He would almost certainly link together poverty, persecution and misery; and wish to combine wealth, popularity and happiness. Yet he would be wrong, and the proofs of it lie thickly on every hand. True, the poor and persecuted man of the world is miserable enough; yet he is not so commonly found, for being of the world, the world loves its own: the rich and popular are seldom marked by happiness. Find on the other hand the true but poor Christian, marked by a confession of Christ's name so courageous and consistent that it brings down upon him the persecution of the world, and you will assuredly find one whose soul has such an entrance into the favour of God and the fulness of Christ that his heart is filled with joy.

Here then were these Macedonians, poor, persecuted and yet with a large spiritual entrance into the heavenly blessings and joys of Christianity, and these three things combining, they "abounded unto the riches of their liberality" ("their free-hearted liberality," N. T.). They not only gave to their power, but even beyond their power, as Paul bears them record. How interesting is the light which all this sheds on the epistle to the Philippians, and vice versa. In that epistle their poverty is only once alluded

to, and that in a very delicate way, when the apostle says, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." We have no wish to belittle the general application of these words to any saint in need, and thereby rob them of the comfort they give, but the special application of them evidently is to saints who were poor to begin with, and who impoverished themselves still further by large-hearted giving in the service of God. The persecution they were enduring is alluded to in Phil. 1: 28, and joy, as we know, characterizes that epistle.

All this was intended to have, and doubtless did have, a very stimulating effect upon the Corinthians, who were well-off and inclined to be luxurious as we gather from the first epistle (1 Cor. 4: 8). In spite of the readiness of their mind, they had been entirely outstripped in performance by these poor Macedonians. The apostle, however, does not leave it at that, but carries the matter a point further by holding up as an example

THE MANNER

in which they accomplished their giving. He tells us in the 5th verse that they did it in a way that exceeded all his expectations by first giving "their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God."

It was good that they should give, but doubly good that they should give after such a fashion as this. They might have begun and ended by just giving of their substance; as it was, they first gave themselves to the Lord — they yielded themselves to Him, to be wholly at His disposal — and then as a consequence gave as he directed and all His love prompted; laying their possessions at the apostle's feet, according to His will.

This was giving of a very rare sort to which but few of us have attained. To have so definitely given ourselves to the Lord that we do not regard what we possess as our own but His, is not a common thing. The world may inscribe the words, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof," over the Royal Exchange in the City, yet within its courts, and all around, men drive their bargains with a view to obtaining as large a share of God's earth as ever they can, and to keeping the share which they get as much in their own power as possible. Likewise Christians may very lustily sing:

"Nought that I have my own I call,
I hold it for the Giver,"

and yet betray by their outlook and actions that they are very largely holding it for themselves. But if first we give ourselves to the Lord, then all that we have is necessarily at His disposal. How many of us have reached that point in our history where this becomes an accomplished fact?

It may help us to reach that point if we notice

THE CHARACTER

that giving bears in the case of the Christian. It is not spoken of here as generosity, though we do not deny that it has that character, but as *righteousness*. The apostle quotes from the Psalm, "He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth for ever." And again, he speaks of God increasing "the fruits of your righteousness." Further it is a striking fact that in such a Scripture as Matt. 6 the word for "alms" is really "righteousness," as an ordinary reference Bible will show.

From this it is evident that it is the normal and proper thing for the Christian to be a giver. If he gives, it is not to be regarded as something wonderful and unexpected for which he is to be highly complimented; the case is rather that if he does not give he is unrighteous. It is positively wrong if he receives such a wealth of blessing from God and yet gives out nothing as a result, and not only wrong but dangerous. If a reservoir has a large intake and a choked-up outflow, a catastrophe of some sort is certain. Nothing is more certain than that the believer is set in this world to be a giver, a dispenser of good things to those in need. This is an obligation which grace imposes, and it is the merest righteousness to fulfil it.

If our giving is to be according to God, one thing further we must notice.

THE SPIRIT

of our giving must be right. This the apostle felt in regard to the Corinthians, and **hence** while setting before them the motive and the stimulus, and indicating the manner and character of it, he is careful in chapter 9 to exhort them to give not grudgingly but cheerfully. He instructed them to give "every man according as he purposeth in his heart," and further he took the precaution of sending certain brethren in advance of his own coming to collect that which they purposed to give, so that "the same might be ready, as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness" ("as blessing, and not as got out of you," N. T.). Neither in appearance nor in fact did he wish their giving to be made under pressure. He had no desire to extract unwilling donations, or excite them into a generosity which went beyond the faith and grace which they possessed, and which afterwards they might regret. What they gave, whether sparingly or bountifully, was to be given with cheerfulness and joy.

The fact is, of course, that though money has a place in connection with the work of God, it has relatively a small place. It is a thing of minor importance here, and if taken out of its place it becomes a curse and not a blessing. God loves a cheerful giver, but He never lowers Himself into the position of grasping from man all He can get, as though it were of importance to Him. If we give, then let us give with icy and cheerfulness. If we aim at inciting others to give, as Paul was doing here, let us avoid every method and every artifice which would be unworthy of the God whom we profess to serve.

Our chapters afford us further instruction on this subject which we must notice. There is a very clear statement of

THE PRINCIPLE

which underlies all giving, especially when, as here, it is a case of giving between believers. The apostle states it in these words: "I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality" (2 Cor. 8: 13, 14). He goes on to confirm his words by a quotation from the Old Testament showing that the rich had nothing over, and at the same time the poor had no lack.

At the moment when Paul wrote the need was amongst the saints in Jerusalem and the supply was found amongst the Gentile saints who had been reached through Paul's labours. A tide of supply was consequently to flow from the latter to the former. In process of time the situation might be exactly reversed, and then the tide should flow in the opposite direction. In the physical creation, as we have often been told, "Nature abhors a vacuum." So it is also in the spiritual realm.

We must remember, then, that the principle which governs our giving is this, if indeed we give as to the Lord. Our natural tendency is to give according to whim or fancy, according to our likes and dislikes, to give more largely to those whom we like and favour and to withhold from those whom we do not like, even though their need be great, and in so acting we serve our own pleasure and not the Lord.

Another thing which comes clearly into view in these chapters is

THE METHOD

which should be pursued in our giving, and not only in our giving, but in the way the gift should be handled by those who have the business of dealing with it. Paul himself was the chief trustee in connection with this collection made amongst the Gentile assemblies, and he took great care that all should be administered with openness and integrity. His own words are, "Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us: providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor. 8: 20, 21). In pursuance of this care he associated with himself no less than three brethren, one of them Titus, who was Paul's nominee in the matter. The other two were messengers of the churches and chosen by them for this service. Of these two, one was much esteemed as an evangelist, the other was noted for his diligence.

It is worthy of note that it is only in connection with the righteous distribution of monetary or other benefits that we find the church choosing the men to be employed. The church chose the seven men of good report who were to properly distribute the daily ration, as recorded in Acts 6. The disciples at Antioch sent the relief they collected for the brethren in Judea by men of their own choice in Acts 11. In our passage again we find men acting that were selected by the churches, so that the principle that those who give are the ones to determine who shall handle the gifts evidently has Divine sanction. We have no record in Scripture of the church choosing evangelists, pastors or teachers, or of selecting the elders or bishops who shall exercise rule and oversight. No such authority is committed to the church; it is vested in the Lord.

Lastly we may consider

THE EFFECT

of giving such as is contemplated here. The effect upon the giver varies. If he gives sparingly he reaps sparingly; if he gives bountifully he reaps bountifully. Still, he reaps; and usually in spiritual things. He who sows seed by dispersing abroad what he has to give has to do with a God, "who is able to make all grace abound." ALL grace, be it noted — grace of every kind - grace in spiritual things and grace in material things. The consequence *of* this is that the liberal giver is "enriched in every way unto all free-hearted liberality" (2 Cor. 9: 11, N. Tr.). He is enriched by God so that his giving may go on and expand. This enrichment may not take the form *of* material things; it may please God rather to enrich him in spiritual things, so that he who began by giving a little money may end by dispensing a rich store of spiritual blessing. There is also, of course, the reward which the future will bring, the increase in the fruits of righteousness which may be expected in the coming days, but this is not the main point here.

Still it is strictly true here that as we sow we reap. Many believers who have to complain of lack of joy and liberty and freshness, and who pass their time in a state of chronic weakness, would find the solution of their troubles just at this point. The explanation lies in their lack of compassion and

generosity and openness of heart and hand. In one word, they are selfish.

The effect upon those who benefit by the free-hearted liberality is that their hearts, discerning the real source of the gift, are lifted in praise to God. The service "is abundant also by many thanksgivings to God," and God is glorified. Thus not only are the wants of the saints supplied, but there is a harvest for God Himself in which He delights.

Upon the onlooker, such as Paul himself was in this case, the effect is similar to that produced in the recipients. In thus giving, the saints were reflecting to others the grace which they had received, and Paul delighted in it. His thoughts were naturally diverted from the reflection to the great reality which produced the reflection, and lifting up his soul he closes the chapter with the joyous outburst, "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift." The smallest gift of the humblest believer, if offered in THE NAME, is a reproduction and a reminder of the unspeakable gift, and is consequently fragrant; acceptable to God, and promoting praise in those who behold it.

Will it not be worthwhile for every one of us to diligently cultivate the grace of GIVING?