

Upside Living in a Downside Economy: Giving and Receiving and God...how to live generously...or how to be blessed.

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The Apostle Paul writes a variety of letters in the New Testament and many of them are sparked by particular problems or events in the life of the church. Second Corinthians is sparked by a great famine that had hit in the area of Palestine and the middle east...stretching from Egypt up to Syria and beyond. The Church responded, and this was the first recorded response to a famine by actual citizens in history. Why would anyone give of their hard earned money to people that they did not know and who were no relation to them? What did they care if these people hundreds, perhaps thousands of miles from them lived or died?

But these Christians lived by a different ethic! They cared about people...the lonely, the slave, the downtrodden, the widow and the orphan. They were concerned about those who might starve to death, even if they were thousands of miles away. So the Apostle Paul began to go from church to church taking up an offering for the relief of the famine victims in Palestine and beyond. And here he writes the Corinthians about their giving and their gifts.

But as he does so, he gives us general principles for living generously and for giving...that help us in all times, but especially as we consider what to do in tough financial times. Paul is not above instilling a little competition between the churches...at least using the example of the one to spark the other. So here he uses the Macedonian church as an example for the Corinthian church. The Macedonian church are the Greeks...those who live on the Greek Isles. He has some important principles to lift up that are as true and important today as they were then.

First and most important, the Macedonians gave themselves to the Lord. That is the beginning of all the rest. It is in response to God's greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ. The Macedonians came to understand

what God had done for them in Jesus Christ, how God had loved them with a love that is beyond words...how Jesus came to be among us, and how he died to show us the depth of love and to take away our sins. And he rose from the dead...breaking the power of Sin and death. The Macedonians responded to Jesus' great invitation to Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden...and I will give you rest. Come...Believe...Follow. God has given us his love and his gift of his Son Jesus, and we must respond. We have free will, but each of us must at some point open our hearts and minds and give ourselves over to Christ. For some this is a gradual surrender, and for others is it an all at once emotional letting go and being born again...but for all of us it is coming to trust Jesus completely with our salvation, knowing that it is his grace and not our actions that save us. We can not save ourselves.

Then the Macedonians gave themselves to Paul and the others. The greatest gift you can give someone else is yourself. Your kids don't want or need another toy or some video game...they need you. Your time, your energy, your attention. Your spouse, your friends...they need you, not some substitute. The best gifts that we give contain a part of us, and the best gift is indeed ourselves...our time! The Macedonians give themselves to God and then they gave themselves to Paul and his friends and their work. They got involved. What can you do to serve? What can you do to help? What can you do to make life better for someone you care for or love? Can you mow the lawn for an older person you care about or weed their rose garden? Can you bake something for them? Can you clean the bathroom or do the laundry? Can you make a care package for a college student or a soldier serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. How can you invest yourself? It is more than doing...it is sharing yourself, who you are with those you love. We so often hide behind things we do or have. The Macedonians first gave themselves completely to Christ, holding nothing back. Then they gave themselves to Paul as a brother in Christ, opening themselves to that

relationship without hesitation or reserve. Yes, there is a risk, of course! But they trusted God.

Then they gave to help others. Paul gives some principles for Christian Giving.

--They gave according to their means. The gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. So if a person has a lot and gives a little bit, that gift is likely not acceptable, but if a person has a little and give a little, that gift is cool! Each one gives according to their own ability and means. No one is expected to give beyond their means.

--They are to give a considered or thoughtful gift. Some gifts are spur of the moment or spontaneous. But most are to be planned and prayed over. That means you should have a real budget, and know how much you do have, earn, and spend. What can you afford to give? I also recommend you get wise counsel and financial advice. Remember, that our gifts are not always money. God is concerned with the whole person, not just our check book and bank account. Sometimes writing a check is too easy a way for us to be uninvolved, and we need to do something...to be involved in real ministry. Remember, Our financial gifts do not absolve us of the need to be involved in ministry...to help people and give ourselves in service to others.

--Their giving should lift their spirits. God loves a cheerful giver! Think how it brings joy to those in need. Think about the children touched by our Christmas Giving Tree...the smiles on their faces and the laughter on Christmas morning! Many would have no Christmas presents without you! That should make you joyful! God loves a joyful giver and sometimes I get so joyful when I'm giving that I am almost giddy. I can't help it.

--Remember, you can't out give God. We don't give so we can receive, but when we give, God is able to give back to us. It is not quid pro quo, but when we are not giving, our hands are closed. Our fists are tightly held around things. And God can not force things into our hands

nor into our hearts which also remain quite closed. But when we begin to give, we begin to see ourselves in a different light. We begin to see that but for the grace of God...we could be in this boat too. We begin to see others with compassion. We begin to be moved by other people's stories and to truly pray for them as people. And our hearts begin to open, and our hands open as well. We begin to be more generous in our attitude and in our actions...and God can be more generous toward us as well. When our hands and hearts are closed up, God can't bless us as well...we just won't receive it. But when we begin to open up...God can also begin to bless us.

The verses say that the one who sows the seeds sparingly will reap a small harvest. The one who sows generously will reap a generous harvest. That is a principle of life. The more we put in, the more we get out. If we are the kind of person who does not give of themselves, who is cold and reserved and aloof...then we will not reap many friends and close personal connections. But if we are the kind of person who reaches out to people and shares our life with them and makes personal connections...who listens to others and truly cares about them...we will make many close personal connections and friends. The one who sows generously will reap generously.

That is the message of the classic Dickens Christmas story, "*A Christmas Carole*". The Story of Ebenezer Scrooge, the ba-humbug of Christmas! It is being made into yet another movie this season...how many is that? The message never goes out of style. It never grows old, this principle of Christian living and giving. If you are a Scrooge, you loose so much of life! God can't bless you...

But if you are an open person, a cheerful giver who cares for others---God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9: 8).