

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 20, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 12:6, 8

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us
.... Let the person who is called to give, give generously.”

THE GIFT OF GIVING

A man was about to be baptized in a river. Suddenly he ran back out of the water explaining that he had forgotten to give his wallet to his wife. The preacher exclaimed, “Come on back with the wallet; I’ve got too many unbaptized wallets in the congregation already!”

Money, of course, is a touchy subject. Someone has said that the most sensitive nerve in the human body is the one that leads to the pocketbook! And yet, as you know, the Bible has a great deal to say about money and stewardship. And one of the spiritual gifts listed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12 is **the gift of giving**. He says, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us... Let the person who is called to give, give generously!”

We might define the gift of giving as the supernatural capacity that God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ to contribute their material resources to the work of the Lord with outstanding liberality and cheerfulness. Notice that I have called it a supernatural capacity. Most of the teaching on spiritual gifts says that a spiritual gift is a God-given ability. But it would be more accurate to say that it is the capacity to develop an ability. What does that mean? Just this. We believe you receive your spiritual gift at the very moment of your conversion. Now, suppose you were saved on a Tuesday evening, and you received the gift of teaching. Wednesday morning you would not wake up a supernatural teacher. But you would wake up with the capacity to develop that gift, and to become a supernatural teacher.

I know I am dating myself when I use this illustration, but some of you will remember an advertisement that used to appear in magazines recommending The Charles Atlas body-building course. There was the picture of a big tough guy kicking sand in the face of a little puny fellow on the beach, embarrassing him in front of his girlfriend. But a picture alongside the first one showed the little fellow who, in the meantime, had taken the Atlas course and built up his muscles, and he is now not only defending himself, but actually beating up on the bully!

Now the point was that when someone sent for the Charles Atlas kit, he didn’t get instant muscles that you could take out of the package and strap on, and all of a sudden, you’d be a Charles Atlas! What you got was a program that taught you how to develop those muscles over a period of time. Through continual exercising, eventually you could become that muscular person like Charles Atlas himself.

And so it is with a spiritual gift—by the grace of God, the capacity develops into an

ability. So, the gift of giving is the capacity to develop the ability to make and distribute money to further the cause of Christ around the world. Needless to say, this gift isn't limited to the wealthy, the "super-rich," in the Body of Christ. It is found among many believers who could never, by any stretch of the imagination, be called "wealthy." Surely the finest example of this gift in the New Testament is the poor widow who put her two mites, all that she had, into the offering box (Mark 12:41-44).

There is no question that every Christian is to give back a portion of his or her income to the Lord. He gives it to us in the first place; it all belongs to Him, and we are to be good stewards of what He has entrusted to us. According to the Bible, every Christian should set definite giving goals, and give with cheerfulness (2 Corinthians 9:7). Rich Christians should give, and poor Christians should give. Young marrieds who have low incomes and high expenses should give alongside older people who are more financially secure.

How much should every Christian give? As I read the Bible, I have to conclude that a tithe, meaning 10% of one's income off the top, is the bare minimum. I am not ordinarily legalistic in my views of Christian conduct, but I do believe that anyone who is under the 10% figure is engaging in a form of spiritual cheating. Some people cheat the Internal Revenue Service regularly, and get away with it. But no one cheats God and gets away with it. "Do not be deceived; God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7). A member of one of the largest evangelical congregations in California, a basically upper-middle-class church, tells how he once figured that if all the members of the congregation received California welfare payments, and tithed, the income of the church would go up by 40%!

The Bible speaks about giving our tithes and offerings. But that same Bible regards the tenth as God's absolute right, before any question arises about the free-will offerings. The tithe is not a free-will offering; it is every Christian's personal obligation. The free-will offerings are what we give over and above our tithe.

I believe also in the graduated tithe. I believe that the tithe, the base 10%, is for Christians who are on welfare! They return a tithe of what they receive—the bare minimum. But as our salary goes up, we should increase the percentage of our giving. The more you make, the higher percentage you should give back to the Lord, because He is even more interested in what you have left than He is in what you give Him. Our Lord said, "Much is required from those to whom much is given" (Luke 12:48). And St. Paul wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, "On every Lord's Day each of you should put aside something from what you have earned during the week... The amount depends on how much the Lord has helped you earn" (1 Corinthians 16:2). What does that mean? Obviously, it means that the more you earn, the more you give.

I'm going to say something now that may surprise you, and it is this—I don't believe that every Christian who tithes necessarily has the spiritual gift of giving. Indeed, I'm going to bare my soul to you and tell you that I doubt whether my wife and I have the gift of giving, even though we have tithed our income during all of our married life. And the reason for this doubt is that we keep asking ourselves the question, "How much can we give to the Lord?" Now I believe that Christians who have the gift of giving don't ask that question at all. They ask another and a very searching question.

And as we approach that question, let me tell you about the late Mr. R.G. LeTourneau, the bulldozer king. God saved him as a teenager, and amongst other gifts, God gave him the gift of craftsmanship, which enabled him to design and then manufacture the heavy earth-moving equipment that is now used around the world. His machinery transformed 5,000 acres of marshland into New York's Kennedy Airport, tore open the wilderness for the Alaskan Highway, made airstrips for the landing of the first Allied fighter planes in France on D-Day, and cleared the debris from bombed-out European cities after World War II. Early in his business career he and his wife gave their tithe to the Lord, but year by year, as the business boomed, he gave an increasingly higher percentage until in 1935 he irrevocably assigned 90% of the company's profits to the LeTourneau Foundation, described as a non-profit corporation "whose income and capital can be used only for the cause of Christ." And then he and his wife gave in cash 90% of the income that was realized from the 10% share of the business that he kept! A close associate of Mr. LeTourneau wrote this about him: "He does not view money as something to be accumulated for the satisfaction of looking at it, counting each day to check its increase, nor as a measure of a man's worth. He sees it only as a means to bring people to Jesus Christ... Although he has made and spent millions, he is remarkably detached from money as such; he is only concerned about what it can accomplish. He often says, 'The question is not how much of my money can I give to God, but rather—how much of God's money can I keep for myself?'" And that is the question the person asks who has the gift of giving:

"How much of God's money can I keep for myself?"

A more contemporary Christian brother with the gift of giving is Mr. Stanley Tam, who founded two companies in Lima, Ohio—States Smelting and Refining Corporation and United States Plastic. In early life, he had an insatiable thirst for making money; but through his conversion and growth in the Christian life, this thirst was transformed into the desire to give money to the Lord's work. As his business began to prosper, he made God his senior partner by legally turning over 51% to his Christian foundation. Later he raised the amount to 60%, and finally to 100%, so that the Foundation now receives the entire profits from the two companies.

Although such highly successful people as LeTourneau and Tam are usually the ones recognized and cited as examples, the gift of giving is bestowed upon lower income people as well. When Paul appealed to believers at Corinth to develop this gift, he used the Macedonian churches as an example. He says in 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, "Now I want to tell you what God in His grace has done for the churches in Macedonia. Though they have been going through much trouble and hard times, they have mixed their wonderful joy with their deep poverty, and the result has been an overflow of giving to others. They gave not only what they could afford, but far more; and I can testify that they did it because they wanted to, and not because of nagging on my part. They begged us to take the money so that they could share in the joy of helping the Christians in Jerusalem."

This same spirit prevailed when poverty continued to rear its head in the early Church. Listen to what we read in Acts 4:32-35, "All the believers were of one heart and mind, and no one felt that what he owned was his own; everyone was sharing. And the apostles preached powerful sermons about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and there was warm fellowship

among all the believers, and no poverty, for all who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money to the apostles to give to others in need.” They certainly displayed the gift of giving in a remarkably loving and sacrificial way.

James McCormick, who has a construction business in Birmingham, Alabama, is now a multimillionaire. But he discovered his gift of giving while he was working in a clothing store and making \$35 a week. At that time, he made a promise to give 50% of his income to the Lord, and he has been doing so ever since; and there is no question that the \$17.50 per week that he gave then was worth just as much to God as the millions he has given since.

It is beautiful today to see how people with minimal income want to give to every worthy cause the church undertakes! They show zeal in giving sacrificially. I don’t know what anyone here at Faith gives except what my wife and I give, but from the outstanding amount of your Faith Promises, I am convinced that many of you have the gift of giving, doing so, perhaps sacrificially, and undoubtedly with cheerfulness. And this the Lord loves! (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Closely linked to this gift of giving is **the gift of voluntary poverty**. Its biblical reference is 1 Corinthians 13:3, “Though I give all I possess to the poor...” This gift is closely related to the gift of giving, but it is different. Probably everyone who has the gift of voluntary poverty also has the gift of giving. However, not all who have the gift of giving have the corresponding gift of voluntary poverty. This gift of voluntary poverty is the special capacity that God gives to certain members of the Body of Christ to renounce material comfort and luxury and adopt a personal lifestyle equivalent to those who live at the poverty level in a given society, in order to serve God more effectively.

The great John Wesley had both the gift of giving and the gift of voluntary poverty. When he died, he left a well-worn frock coat and two silver teaspoons as his estate. But during his lifetime he had given the equivalent of \$150,000 to the Lord.

George Müller of Bristol, England, of whom we spoke in a previous sermon, was another who had both of these gifts. He died with a total personal estate equivalent to \$850. He was a poor man all his life. Yet when his books were audited after his death, it was discovered, much to everyone’s surprise, that through the years a total of \$180,000 had been given by a donor identified only as “a servant of the Lord Jesus, who, constrained by the love of Christ, seeks to lay up treasure in heaven.” The donor, of course, was Mr. Müller himself.

John Wesley and George Müller stand in contrast to R.G. LeTourneau and Stanley Tam, who both lacked the gift of voluntary poverty. Indeed Mr. Tam is candidly honest in his autobiography when he says, “I like good food, a comfortable house, decent clothes, and a good car. I have an insatiable thirst to make money. I love it. I like to promote, to see the companies grow. I study our reports like a hungry hawk, evaluating, discovering, making checks and counterchecks.” And yet, he now turns 100% of his profits back to the Lord for the spread of the Gospel!

Contrast LeTourneau and Tam with another group of American Christians, who call themselves the People’s Christian Coalition. They exercise their gift of voluntary poverty by

choosing to live a simple lifestyle in a commune in one of the poorest sections of Washington, D.C.; and they are to be commended for using their gifts to contribute to the assistance of the poorest of the poor in Washington's ghetto. They publish a monthly magazine entitled *Sojourners*, to which I subscribed for a year back in the 1970s. However, I became somewhat disenchanted with their continual attempt to produce biblical reasons why the kind of radical lifestyle they have developed might be more pleasing to God than the lifestyle of other Christians in our society who have, and are exercising, other spiritual gifts, but who are living at a more comfortable economic level. They associate such people with the "establishment" which is blamed for a variety of social and economic evils; and I just don't buy that at all.

I believe that God has given some people the capacity to make a lot of money because He knows He can trust them, as good stewards, to use their considerable assets in His service. They derive great joy and fulfillment from seeing God work through their gifts.

Perhaps God is awakening your conscience to give with outstanding liberality. If you are discovering that God is blessing you financially, consider your responsibility. You may not be able to teach. You may not enjoy visitation. You may not have musical ability. But if God has opened the door of opportunity for you to make money, then consider which of these two questions you should honestly ask yourself. Should it be

"How much can I give to the Lord?"

or should it be

"How much of God's money can I keep for myself?"

Perhaps you will discover that God has bestowed on you the gift of giving. But if He hasn't, remember that every Christian is called to be at least a tither and to act responsibly before the Lord financially. Certainly, if we all do what the Lord calls us to do, the resources thus released for the spread of the Gospel and the care of the suffering and the poverty-stricken would be incredible!

AMEN.