

2 Corinthians 9:10-15
Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 9, 2022

"Tis better to give than to receive." I'm not trying to join the hype for the Christmas season with that proverbial saying. Stores and online merchants do that enough, but today's text leads us to think about giving and material possessions. We all know the saying, "Money can't buy happiness." There is the joking response, "No, but it sure helps." Actually today I'm going to refute that old saying and maintain,

MONEY CAN BUY HAPPINESS

- I. Helping others
- II. Praising God
- III. Celebrating God's grace

Sharing of money does bring happiness when we are helping others. At the time of the text the Apostle Paul and his coworkers were gathering an offering for the Christians in Jerusalem who were suffering. Their difficulties may have resulted from famine or persecution or perhaps both conditions. He had announced to the mission congregations he had founded a relief offering for their fellow believers. The group in Corinth was originally interested and eager to participate. He had used their zeal as an example and encouragement to other congregations.

Time had passed. Sometimes people lose steam. We see that in our short attention span when disasters make the headlines and bring a spurt of interest but before long we grow indifferent or something else replaces it in the news. Other issues could have distracted the Corinthians as there were local matters to deal with, the various topics addressed in Paul's first letter to them. Now he was coming to pick up the offering and take it to Jerusalem. Would it be ready? He wanted neither embarrassment for them nor a lost opportunity to share in the endeavor. Others, especially the Macedonians, who had given generously despite their own poor conditions, he now used as an example for them.

The Lord had supplied the means for being generous. He had provided them with wealth. "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness." We witness the process in nature with farming and gardening. The Lord provides seed to plant in which he has created the capability of growing under the right conditions, which he also supplies. A harvest then results. His giving provides us with blessings, with everything that we have. He supplies us with enough for our needs and more. That bounty gives us the ability to share with others.

He also provides the opportunity to help people. Needs exist both close at hand and far away. Think of the hurricane damage in Puerto Rico and most recently in Florida. Fires and floods are commonplace. There are famines further away. There may be needs right next door when a neighbor is hospitalized or a death occurs. There are social needs such as the one our congregation is looking into, providing assistance to those with an unplanned pregnancy.

When the Apostle spoke of generosity he indicated really single-mindedness. He wasn't referring to the amount but to the attitude with which we give. We are looking to help others, not seeking recognition or return.

The Christian gives gladly. A few verses earlier was the statement, "God loves a cheerful giver." Paul's term is the root of our word "hilarious." We enjoy giving. We view it not as a duty or burden but as a privilege. We do not lose when we give. Oh, mathematically it would appear so. If I have five apples and give you one, I have less for myself. Selfishness can rear its ugly head then. But the Lord makes sure we don't end up behind when we are helpful. There are more obstacles to single-minded generosity. Uncertainty about the future, the possibility of loss due to inflation, accident, dishonesty or any of a host of problems may deter good intentions. Rivals for our time can hold us back on giving help. We need the reminder that giving is a joy. It certainly can buy happiness for the recipient. It provides relief from hunger and comforting care. Those benefits come from material sharing like was happening in the text. Our church offerings spread the gospel and bring the joy of knowing the Savior and his forgiveness and the assurance of his love, care and guidance. They bring happiness for the soul.

II.

Someone else is involved in the transaction and that is the Lord. Our gifts are praising God for the help received. The people in need may have prayed. The help received from believers answered those prayers. "Through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." Everything we have comes from him and we are grateful as we return a portion to him. That's why the sacrifices were described as a sweet-smelling savor as the Old Testament worshipers burned animals or portions of them in the temple. God deserves praise for the care of both body and soul that he provides.

There is a saying about giving a man a fish and helping him for a day but teaching him to fish benefits him for a lifetime. Carry that further and we can point out that bringing people the Savior blesses them eternally. How much more gratitude will there be?

There is another dimension to the praising of God. "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else." There is recognition of the bond of faith, of the fellowship with other believers. Such realization was important as the gospel was spreading in Paul's day. Gentiles had been viewed as outsiders by the Jewish people who were conscious of their status as God's chosen nation. There were converts, called proselytes, who joined them in faith and followed their worship and lifestyle practices but they were treated as second class, restricted in the area they could occupy in the temple courts.

Paul and others followed the Savior's commission to make disciples of all nations. Joy came at the conversion of Gentiles to saving faith but making the adjustment in mindset brought some uncomfortable situations. Could they eat together with people they had avoided for years? The relationship to Old Testament laws that were no longer needed to picture the coming Savior and his work brought stress. As the Christians in Jerusalem, mostly of Jewish heritage, received the help from the offering they would see the faith in action and loving concern of these new brothers and sisters. How could they not give thanks for the shared faith both to God and to the givers? The bond of a common faith brought happiness and they praised God together.

We experience the same. When synod leaders and mission boards return from a visit to fields far removed from us they have reported expressions of thanks from people we are unlikely to meet on this side of heaven. They may be people we would be uncomfortable with, sometimes with different appearance, language or a culture that is unfamiliar to us. There may even be former enemies. I recall a World War II veteran who was a shut-in when a former colleague (who will preach here in November) accepted a call as a missionary to Japan. He said he would never be able to bring himself to do that after the suffering he and other soldiers experienced in the war. Or we think of Viet Nam and the work we have been invited to do—by the communist government, no less. It is wonderful when the past is overcome and we can serve God together. Again, our reason for reaching out is not for recognition but it is a joy to experience and we look forward to doing so eternally.

III.

Those experiences all point to another act of happiness and that is celebrating God's grace. Grace is what God's actions are all about. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" Paul burst forth and in a previous verse noted God's "surpassing grace." We often define grace as "undeserved love." It is an accurate assessment. Because we know God and his will and our own behavior toward him

and others, we are well aware of our shortcomings. We were born in sin. We commit more daily in our thoughts, words and actions. As we confessed at the outset of the service, "I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good (sins of commission and omission we term them in catechism study)." Every deed of ours is tainted with sin, sometimes despite good intentions. Even the giving we are discussing this morning can come from wrong motives like getting something in return or being honored. Other times our sinful actions are deliberate or done in ignorance or habitual and unthinking like the foul speech that spews from our lips. We know that we deserve God's punishment now and eternally. It is an enormous burden that weighs us down.

What we have instead received is forgiveness full and free. Jesus came and took care of it all. He lifted the guilt from our shoulders when he paid for our sins on the cross. He rose from death and proclaims his victory. He brought that message to you and to me. He overcame our natural unbelief and brought us to faith. What joy fills our hearts! We have the assurance of our status as his children, loved and cared for. He guides, directs us and leads us on the right paths.

Then think of what we have to come: heaven with all its splendor, beauty, peace, security and unending happiness as we rejoice with all believers in God's presence.

God's work produces a response. Paul mentioned "the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ." We often call it producing fruits of faith. It is the response of a believing heart. Gratitude overcomes selfishness and leads to generosity, that single-minded purpose. When Paul called it service he used a term that is the origin of our word "liturgy." We use that word for the order of service we follow in worship. Here we're not talking just about the pastor leading us on Sunday morning. Your life is an act of worship and service to God.

Doesn't that understanding put each day in a new perspective? As the Bible says, "Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God." That includes here at church, at home, on the job or at school—each act expresses your love for Jesus and your joy in knowing the Savior. It is a celebration of God's grace.

Despite the theme I stated, money can't buy happiness—but giving can. May you live each day experiencing that happiness as you share your wealth and the wealth of God's grace!