

Augusta First Baptist Church
September 24, 2006
2 Corinthians 9:11-15
Every Good and Perfect Gift: The Gift of Sharing
Stewardship 2006

NRS 2 Corinthians 9: 11 *“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”*

For these past Sundays we have been inspired by the verse from James 1:17 –*Every good and perfect gift is from above...* Everything that is good—everything that draws us to celebrate— “every,” I mean every good gift is from God. Two Sundays ago we celebrated the gift of relationships - the gift of each other. I am so glad to participate in that gift with each of you. It is good to be here. Last Sunday we shared together in the gift of growing. What a blessing it is to know that we are not created to be stagnant creatures but that no matter the age there is more to learn, more to become and we have a responsibility to nurture that gift of growing. Today our focus is on the gift of sharing.

To guide us in that gift we turn to Paul’s second letter to the church of Corinth. The ancient city of Corinth was a cosmopolitan city that has been compared to New Orleans or New York. All roads seemed to lead there. It was urban, bustling, and very religious. Christianity was a minor sect surrounded by pagan Greek temples dedicated to such deities as Apollo, Athena, Poseidon, Heracles and Hermes. Unlike other first century churches, the Corinthian Christians were comparatively well off. The pluralistic culture accepted Christianity and so they were doing much better than their counterparts in Palestine, who were suffering greatly for their beliefs. In this particular letter to these Christians, Paul was appealing to them to help support the Jewish Christians who were in dire circumstances. The core of his request, which begins in chapter eight and continues through chapter nine, is that this comparatively privileged and blessed congregation should share in their abundance with those who are in need. In very matter of fact terms Paul says that to share is one of God’s gifts (he uses the word grace) to the believers. In the NIV 8:7 is translated *But just as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving – the gift of sharing.*

I wonder, do you always think of sharing as a gift? For me it has not always felt like a gift. I can remember the hard lessons as a small child on being instructed to share my toys, share my bicycle, share my clothes. I am not sure how some of you children feel about it and I am not sure how some of you adults remember how you felt about it, but I did not like the idea of sharing, and I certainly did not think of it as a gift. The reason was simple: I felt that if I shared something precious to me, I would be denied the pleasure that it brought me. What I did not see at the time is that the sustaining pleasure was not in me selfishly enjoying something just for me, but in seeing how someone else could also share in that joy.

Nearly every evening when I come home one or both of my boys are out skateboarding in the driveway. They enjoy skateboarding. It gives them pleasure, and thankfully I do not feel the need to share their skateboard! Every time I pull into the garage, however, one of my son’s calls out to show me his latest trick or stunt on the skateboard. He is enjoying the skateboard, but his joy is enhanced when he can share this with someone else.

When we deny ourselves the pleasure of sharing we fear, I suspect, that we do not want to lose something that defines who we are. For many, we are defined by what we make, what we spend and what we

own. There is no escaping it. Even I, your “devout” pastor whose mind is suppose to dwell only on things pure and holy, find myself comparing what I have with other pastors. I look at what I drive and wonder is a MINI Cooper really the appropriate vehicle for a pastor?

But God’s kingdom – God’s realm – defines human life differently. We think in terms of dollars – pure and simple. And with those dollars we buy what we want and make consumer choices by what we drive, what we wear, and how we live. We tend to define ourselves according to our commodities.

In the ancient times one’s reference to personal value was different but the same idea: instead of currency it was herds of sheep, goat or cattle; the color of fabric; whether or not one owned one or two outer tunics (and by the way in those ancient days someone was considered wealthy if they had as many as six sets of clothes) – these were ways to determine individual wealth. Today, it is the number of bedrooms in a house, the style and brand name of clothing, the year, make, and model of a car, and how we are employed.

There is nothing wrong with wealth. Notice what Paul says in verse 8: “*And God is able to provide you with every blessing **in abundance**, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.*” There is nothing wrong with wealth. Wealth is a gift, to be sure, but one is not defined by wealth and possessions. God’s kingdom doesn’t work that way.

The definition of whom we are really comes about with ***how we share*** what God has given us: wealth, possessions, talents, gifts, family, friends – all these and more are a picture of God’s generous gifts to us.

By now you know where I am going with this. You have been waiting for it. You know that stewardship may not be all about money, but neither is it not about money. From the Old Testament to the New the Bible has instructed God’s people to share of their resources.

Why share? Well, for starters the Bible says so. Now I know that on one level it is awfully simplistic and predictable for me to say that. Still, how we use our wealth is mapped out in very clear terms.

Consider the hard words of Malachi 3:10 “*Bring the full **tithe** into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.*”

Why share? Jesus expected it. He invited disciples to leave everything; when thousands around him were hungry, a little boy stepped up and shared his lunch, and so on. It is interesting that Jesus did not spend much time wrestling over percentages, but his steady invitation was to share.

In the passage read this morning Paul fully expects the Corinthians to step up to the proverbial offering plate in regards to providing help for the impoverished Christians elsewhere.

Probably there are a number of ways I can motivate you to be a giver and not just a receiver -- ***How about guilt?*** I could, for example, tell you that if you and I do not share of our wealth for the ministries and mission of this church we are going to have to lay off staff, we will have to cut out some of our ministries, shut down our mission endeavors, tell the children and youth that we are sorry, but, they are going to have to look elsewhere for support and guidance. I can use guilt to motivate, but that is not good nor is it ultimately effective.

No. I would rather, you decide to give and support out of an act of faith and trust that God defines who you are – not your possessions. How you give tells the story of God’s gifts to you. **It’s a Matter of Trust.**

Think about this at a most elemental level, when we do not want to share, it is because we do not trust. When we were children and did not want to share our toys, it was because at some level we did not trust that the person would give the toy back or would not take care of the toy or that we would never have another toy like it again. As we get older, we move from GI Joes and bicycles to stock options and checking accounts and all the things its wealth can secure.

Perhaps more than any other tangible way in our life, how we give is a matter of whether or not we really trust God. Sure, we trust God enough to pray, to read the Bible, to get us into heaven when our time has come. But do we trust God with our wealth? Are we willing to claim that it is not ours but God's and by giving we are simply giving back to God?

I can accept the fact you may not trust me. Believe me; I know how untrustworthy I can be. I can even accept the fact that some of you may not trust this church. From time to time the church has made mistakes; we don't always get it right. But the fact is this church is made up of you and me and even though we have our faults I believe we are ultimately here seeking to do the will, the witness and the work of God. Do you trust God enough to put a part of your resources as an offering to God through this church? Now if you do not, then you need to find a place where you do.

This brings me to the subject of tithing. The word means pretty much exactly what you think it means - a tenth. The difficulty with any study on tithing is that the Bible uses it in a variety of ways. Strictly speaking, in the Old Testament at least, when one finished with all their tithing obligations, it was as much as one third of their income which was given back to God. In the New Testament, giving is not as clearly defined. The widow gave two pennies (Mark 12:42), the Pharisees gave a tenth, (Matthew 23:23), Zacchaeus gave half (Luke 19:8), the rich man was asked to give all (Mark 10:21-22) and the early church that we read of in Acts was asked to share everything in common (Acts4:37). Even when we speak of tithing today, it is not that straightforward. Do you give a tenth of your gross income or after taxes are taken out?

What is clear in the Bible, however, is that all of God's people were asked to give something. Jesus went so far as to say, "*you best be ready to give your life*" (Matthew 10:39).

I recognize that most of you do not tithe, that is, give 10 percent of your income. In fact, in 2004 out of just more than thirteen hundred families, 436 did not give anything. Let me challenge you on a different level. What Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to do regarding their sharing should be replicated today. **Plan your giving.** In verse five Paul is giving them a "heads-up." So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead of you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion. Be prepared, set it aside.

If you say to me, "Greg I just cannot give 10 percent. I will not be able to meet my mortgage, pay bills, etc." I say fine, but that is not an excuse to reject God's gift of sharing. Set aside something, don't just give God the leftovers of your wealth, set aside one percent, two percent, five percent.

Set aside something and say in very clear terms – **this is God's**. Most all of us here this morning set aside money each month and say: this is the cable company's, this is for the bank for the car I drive, this is for the phone bill, this is for the internet, this is for video rental. You get the picture. Every month we set aside a portion of our money for the things in life we enjoy or say we need.

Don't you think God deserves the same sort of attitude we give to BellSouth? To say each week, God this is part of what is Yours. Thank you. Use it. Bless it. Multiply it.

I am not asking you to support the church budget or other institutional programs. You have a right to sit there and think, *I think we give too much (or too little) to missions, to youth, to the social ministries, or to the staff, etc.*

No, I am not asking you to support the church budget. **I am asking for your trust that this church will use your offering to God to do the work of God.** That is what I am asking this morning. I don't know how I can make it any clearer. If you cannot trust this church or that God will see to its proper use through this church, then you need to find a place of worship where you can. It is as simple as that.

Trust is reciprocal. You have invested a great deal of trust in me to serve you as your pastor. There is much you just do not know about me, but you trust that in our years together, our discovery and growth will be sweet and beautiful. Likewise, there is much I have yet to discover about First Baptist Church. But I trust that in the years ahead our relationship will grow as we share in each other's lives. Trust— it is what makes the gift of sharing a good and perfect gift from God.