



Dr. James C. Howell
2 Corinthians 8-9, selected verses
October 25, 2009

These words that Courtenay just read reveal the Apostle Paul doing what I did this past week. Paul is writing a little fund-raising letter – I know that gets you excited – you're looking for a fund-raising letter from me this coming week. Paul's is interesting. It begins by bragging on the Macedonians. He is bragging on them because what he is doing in this letter is he's asking the poor to give for the poor. It's interesting. Paul, as he talks about this, he associates joy with poverty, and it's one of those things that we find on mission trips. Some of those people say, "Why do you go to other countries instead of just being around Charlotte?" There's something I absolutely never find around Charlotte but I frequently find in other places where there is great poverty. What we find there are people – they have nothing, but they have an immense capacity for joy, and sometimes that immense capacity for joy gets lost for us in the thicket of business and things that we have. Paul, as he speaks of these poor giving to the poor, he speaks of their wealth of liberality, their wealth of generosity. He says that they gave beyond their means. You have to pay attention to that. He says they gave beyond their means; they gave beyond what they even needed for themselves.

This always reminds me now of a woman I met on a mission trip to Lithuania. Her name is Regina. My daughter, Grace, and I stayed with her. You would count Regina as way beneath the poverty level. She did not have running water. She only had occasional electricity. Many days she had one sparse meal. But yet, Regina and 20 other women in the church that we helped sponsor in Birzai, Lithuania, would drive out into the countryside to the people they regarded as poor. They would take the little bit that they had and they would go out to reach out to those who were in need.

Paul says that God loves a cheerful giver. We're going to have a little Greek lesson today. The word translated, cheerful, is *Polaris*. It's hilarious. Paul says, "God loves a *Polaris* giver" – to give is just hilarious, your giving. I couldn't think of how to get you in the spirit of this today. I thought, "A standup comedy routine and get everybody laughing hard." You get in the spirit of what it is to give, hilarious giving. I tried to think of examples of this. I love Annie Dillard's story of when she was growing up in Pittsburgh. When she was a little girl, if she got some money, what she really liked to do with it was to go out and to hide it in a crack in the sidewalk or in the nook in the roots of a tree and then she would take chalk and would draw big arrows on the sidewalk and when she learned to write words, she would write "money this way, treasure ahead." And then she would hide behind a bush and someone would come and discover the money, and she just thought that was the most fun – hilarious giving.

In the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, the narrator tells about the grandfather who was so generous. If he knew somebody who needed clothing, he would take the clothes right off his own clothesline and give them away to those who needed it. As the narrator puts it, "My grandfather never kept anything that was worth giving away. My grandfather never kept anything that was worth giving away." In another place in the story, he says, "My grandfather never thought anything was too good to give away. My grandfather never thought anything was too good to give away."

One of my favorite stories of hilarious giving, and I told a few of you this before. You know, I'm in Year 7 of being your pastor and I only know so much stuff, so you get some reruns

here. But I'm going to do something different with it. St. Francis had a very good friend and colleague named Brother Juniper, and here's what the biographer of Brother Juniper wrote, "His love for the poor was so great that if he saw someone in need he would give away the very clothes off his back." He did this over and over until, finally, his guardian ordered him not to give his tunic or any part of it to a beggar. But soon, Juniper was approached by a pauper asking for alms. Juniper replied "I have nothing to give you except this tunic, and I cannot give it to you due to my vow of obedience. However, if you steal it from me, I will not stop you." Left naked, Juniper returned to the other friars and told them that he had been robbed. His compassion became so great that he gave away, not only his own things, but the books, altar linens and capes belonging to other friars. So when the poor came to Brother Juniper, the other friars would hide their belongings so he could not find them.

I love this idea of giving other people's stuff away, and I get to do this for a living, and I want to thank you very much for the privilege of doing this. It reminds me of an incident years ago when I was a pastor in Davidson when we decided to revamp our annual financial campaign. We had a committee of 17 extremely smart people in a room, and they made just the most bungling error that I still can't begin to explain. They revised how we were going to ask for money; they revised the pledge cards; 17 people proof-read it very, very carefully. It was great and we were so excited about it. We mailed out a couple of thousand of them, and the first phone call back to the church told us what we had missed. A guy said, "James, do you know what's missing on this pledge card?" I said "No, what?" He said, "There's nowhere to put your name." We just missed that; it's kind of a basic item. And the joke around the church then got to be to put somebody else's name, like "Pledge for others." It became a lovely idea because what we often do, don't we, is we think "He ought to give a lot" or "I'm kind of stretched but that guy over there, surely he can step up." And we can do this, over and over, and we forget that Paul did not say, "He who thinks others should sow bountifully will reap bountifully." No, Paul said, "He who sows bountifully – yourself – not somebody else, will reap bountifully. Nobody can stand in for you and grow in your faith. Nobody can stand in for you and have a generous spirit. No one can stand in for you and enjoy the hilarity of what this kind of reckless giving can be. And, after all, at the end of the day, we do always give away somebody else's stuff. Because anything that we give really belongs to God; it's now our own; it's somebody else's stuff.

The other Greek word that is interesting in this I think is Paul speaks of those who so bountifully, the Greek that is translated 'bountifully' is "ep eulogiais." What it really means is "from blessing, from blessing." We give "from blessing," and what are our blessings? We think of it at a meal; we say a blessing or sometimes we look around at all the stuff that we have and we say "I have been blessed." And it's a nice thought, but I don't have a well-developed theology of this. Is it the case that the stuff that you have is something that God gave you?

I like the idea, but I always think about this guy that I knew a number of years ago. He was also a member of Davidson United Methodist Church. I meet a lot of interesting people in my work, believe me, and this guy was a tither. He gave 10 percent of whatever money he made to the church, and it was always down to the penny. It was never a round number. It was always down to an exact penny. And what he did for a living, this is so interesting, is he was a gambler. He made a living, a good living, gambling. He would fly off to Vegas, and he was just really successful, and whatever he would win, he would give 10 percent of it, down to the penny, to the church. It was interesting. It was always in cash, and he did not wish to have a printed statement from the church. And he believed that this worked. He believed that the reason he did so well gambling was because

he tithed to God. Think of a picture of God in that, God's up there saying, "Because you tithe your winnings, I'm going to make the dice roll..." It's crazy. The money that he had, did God give it to him? How does that work? You happen to have a lot of stuff. I still have a good theology of that – you know, you have a nice house, a lot of stuff, and a big pile of food. I mean, can you say God gave you that? Because if you do, then you're kind of stuck thinking about the woman, Regina, in Lithuania who's got nothing, and you say, "God just withheld from that person, why?"

We can't make any sense of this. The only way to work it out really comes from a Haitian proverb that I treasure. The Haitians have interesting proverbs for almost everything. The best of them, though, is "God gives, but God doesn't share." God – think about that – "God gives but God doesn't share." God gives us enough down here for everybody, but it's up to us to do the sharing. And the question is, What do we think is ours? Are we involved in the sharing, the hilarity of giving?

There's one other thing that I want to say about this in closing, back to that Greek word translated from "blessings." If you have a good ear, you might be showing some natural gifts at Greek. You may detect the word "eulogy." Paul says that it's like a eulogy when you give hilariously. What is a eulogy? The Greek word eulogy means a good word, and for us a eulogy typically is a good word that is offered at a funeral, isn't it?

When I started in ministry 30 years ago, only the clergy were allowed to speak at a funeral. That's changed nowadays. Now there are a lot of family members or friends who will speak. They'll give a eulogy at the funeral. Sometimes it's so lovely, and then there are other times... The loveliest eulogy that I ever heard was when I buried a man who was 45 years old. He had pancreatic cancer and suffered terribly, but only for a short period of time, died a terrible death. We came to prepare the funeral and he had one child, a 14-year-old daughter. She said to me, "I want to speak at the funeral." I thought, "There's going to be so much grief. I'm not sure it's a good idea." But she really insisted. She really wanted to say something at her father's funeral. She said, "I'll need you to stand in the pulpit next to me when I come up, but I really want to speak." So I said, "OK." The time came for the service and she got up out of her seat and she walked up into the pulpit and I had my arm around her and she said very simply this: "My daddy was the greatest daddy in the world. My daddy was the greatest daddy in the world." And she sat down. Eulogy is a good word.

The question that I have is that Paul says we give in a eulogy kind of way, we give in a good way. The question we have to ask is: In the way we give of ourselves, in the way we give of what we have of our talents, of our time, of our money, anything, can people overhear a good word about God? Or does this speak more to our own self-indulgence, our stinginess. Do we give of ourselves in a way that we echo the words of that daughter? Do we say somehow through the way that we give of ourselves "Our God is a great God. Our God is the greatest of all the Gods." There are all kinds of Gods that clammer for our attention out there, but we'll have none of it. Only our God, the one who created the world and came down in the person of Jesus, and he touched those no one else would touch. He healed, he taught. They killed him but God raised him from the dead and he is still alive. He is still inspiring us. He is still motivating us. That God is the greatest of all the Gods. If we could do this, if we could do this, I think we would slap our knee and we'd laugh out loud. We would discover the hilarity of giving. God loves a cheerful giver.

Thanks be to God...