

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: stretched Thin

(Building Faith at Home Series)

Return on Investment

(2 Corinthians 9)

Study #3

Introduction: Seed money...

Acting on the South Texas truism that *"It might freeze, but you know it's going to get hot"* I'm already later than I like to be in planting my spring garden. But I am getting ready.

Last week I spent about \$5 on tomato seedlings, which are growing just fine in the garage. Tomorrow, I'll spend a few bucks on squash and green bean seed packets, to be followed by pepper seedlings and then okra seed packets.

The hope is for dozens and dozens of summer tomatoes and bushels of other veggies. But I know that a bumper crop isn't at all a sure thing.

Over the years of my gardening life, I've lost harvests to all sorts of things: misapplication of fertilizers, plant diseases, insects, over-watering, drought and, most recently, bunnies.

Yes, bunnies! They multiply like, well, rabbits, in our neighborhood.

Last fall I lost what was looking like a nice garden OVERNIGHT when the local rabbit gang found my Swiss chard, lettuce, spinach, and broccoli. I was bummed.

Not like a farmer is bummed when hail destroys a whole field of nearly ripe corn. But I had planted and fertilized and watered and weeded and I wanted a harvest. I wanted all of that dirty investment to pay a good rate of return.

So, I'll plant *after* I put up a rabbit-proof fence.

You may or may not garden, but you "get" why I was bummed. You understand because when you invest in something, you, too, want a great return on investment.

You want the new exercise program to make you feel fit and strong and to make you look good. You want your financial investments to pay off with good earnings. You want the overtime you're putting in to result in success at work.

We're all wired to want to see our investments pay dividends.

So, what if there was an investment you could make that had an amazing return on investment, that this return was guaranteed, and that this investment benefitted you, blessed others, and honored God?

You'd want to sign up for that investment right now!

Well, the Bible passage we're exploring this morning points to that exact investment. The Apostle Paul uses the vocabulary of seed and harvest, but he's talking about something earthier than gardening. He's talking about money.

Stretched thin...

Over the past two Sundays, Pastor Jeff has done a great job addressing the theme of time. If you feel stretched thin and need some breathing space, time-wise, I recommend listening - or listening again - to Jeff's two messages.

This morning, though, we are turning to 2 Corinthians 9, which is the second half of a two-chapter section dedicated to the theme of handling money, God's way.

And if today, you're feeling a bit stretched, financially, Paul's words may be just what you're needing to hear.

Setting the context...

Paul wrote what he did in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 because there were Christians, living in the land of Palestine, who were suffering from the double whammy of a famine + persecution.

Paul was writing from the province of Macedonia and he told the Corinthian Christians - a couple of hundred miles away in Achaia - about the desperate need of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was a thousand miles away from Corinth, but Paul's news brought a flurry of Corinthian concern for the suffering Christians there.

But then, after the initial concern, exactly nothing happened. No offering. No giving. The Corinthian Christians didn't actually help out. Paul writes to address that disconnect between wanting to give / being concerned, and actually giving.

The church at Corinth had been established by the Apostle Paul. While he was with them, he taught them as much as he could about living for Jesus. That teaching included instruction about generosity.

We know that he taught them about generosity because of what he says right out of the gate.

Priming the Pump to Give (vv. 1-5)

Moving from Virtual to Actual Giving (vv. 1-2)

You know all this, already... (v. 1)

[1] For it is superfluous for me to write to you about this ministry¹ to the saints

¹ The word we translate "*ministry*" is the Greek "diakonia" which means, simply, service. It is used to describe such wide-ranging activities as giving, table-waiting (Acts 6), preaching, and evangelism.

In other words, "*You guys know this stuff so well, it's pointless for me to even mention it. You could teach this. You passed the Dave Ramsey FPU course with flying colors. You've got this all down cold.*"

And then, after saying that there was no reason to write about money, he goes on to write a lot about money. That tells me that what he had taught them had not made the critical journey from head to heart. They knew the truth about giving, but they didn't KNOW it.

Paul met this crisis of application head-on and he started off by commending them for their enthusiasm for the Jerusalem fund-raiser.

That enthusiasm is described by the word "*readiness.*" And ironically, their "*readiness*" encouraged others to actually give.

The power of a READY example (v. 2)

[2] for I know your READINESS, of which I boast about you to the Macedonians, namely, that Achaia has been prepared since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them.

The city of Corinth was about the largest, most influential, and most prosperous city in all of Greece.²

And when the churches in Macedonia heard that the Corinthians were excited about giving to help the suffering Christians in Jerusalem (note their "*zeal*") they got excited, too. They figured that the Jerusalem fund-raiser was legit if Corinth was behind it.

And the Macedonians gave. They gave sacrificially. They gave more than was expected, given their poverty.

That's great, of course. The problem was that the far wealthier Christians in Corinth had NOT *actually* given.

Paul tells the Corinthians that it's now time to leave the world of want-to giving and actually give. It's time to get prepared.

² It was certainly all of that in the region of Achaia.

PREPARED - that's the thing! (vv. 3-4)

[3] But I have sent the brethren, in order that our boasting about you may not be made empty in this case,³ that, as I was saying, you may be PREPARED; [4] otherwise if any Macedonians come with me⁴ and find you UNPREPARED, we - not to speak of you - will be put to shame by this confidence.

In the military, there are varying levels of preparedness for combat. When someone enlists in the armed forces, he or she is necessarily willing to fight. Or, as Paul says it, “*ready*” to fight. But, being willing and “*ready*” is not the same thing as being “*prepared.*”

Being prepared involves physical and mental conditioning, learning military history and weapons systems, and much, much more.

On the day that the enemy attacks, that recruit needs to be more than *ready and willing*. He or she needs to be *able and prepared*.

For the Corinthians to have been prepared would mean that they had money in hand to give. Paul challenged them to make that all-important step from *ready* to *prepared*.

He wants you and me to take that same step, today.

Prepared to give in 2017...

I know you’re “*ready.*” I know you have a heart to serve the poor and to support Kingdom-of-God sized work. You’re *ready*, and that’s fantastic.

It’s possible, though, that you’re *ready* and not *prepared*.

If that’s you, today is the day to start moving toward *preparedness*.

If you’re married, to prepare is to sit down with your husband, with your wife, and make some life-giving decisions together. Decide to live within your means. Decide to write out and live by a budget. Decide to get rid of the monster of debt.

If you have kids and they are old enough to understand, bring them in on the conversation. Give them a voice. Talk to them about saving and spending and giving.

If you are not married, you can get prepared to give by the choices you make about loans and spending and budgets.

Finances can be confusing. If you’re looking for some help with getting your financial house in order so that you can be prepared, know that there are people here at Northwest who are highly skilled in money matters and they would be delighted to help you.

Is today the day that you start to get a handle on your financial life so that you can be as generous as you long to be?

Here’s what that looks like.

When you are prepared, and you hear about a need, you can say, “*Yes.*”

You can help your friend who has fallen on hard times. You can give to serve the poor. You can give to support a crisis. You can give to support your church. You can give to support missions.

So, yes. Now is the time and today is the day to start moving from *ready* to *prepared*.

Then, after urging preparedness in the giver, Paul highlights the need to safeguard integrity on the part of the receiver.

Paul was asking that the Corinthians send their hard-earned cash to Jerusalem. And if you’re making that kind of an “*ask*”, there has to be assurance that the gift is safe and that the gift will be used to meet the intended need.

³ Paul didn’t misrepresent the Corinthians to the Macedonians. But, he was in the habit of seeing the best in people and presenting them in this light to others.

⁴ Paul evidently had every intention of traveling to Corinth and following up with the collection efforts of Titus and the two brothers.

Safeguarding Integrity (v. 5)

[5] So I thought it necessary to urge THE BRETHREN that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, so that the same might be ready as a bountiful gift and not affected by covetousness.

That reference to “*the brethren*” speaks of the three men who would hand-carry the offering all the way to Jerusalem.

Much of 2 Corinthians 8 is given to certifying that these were godly men who could be trusted with money.

They were to ensure that everything about the collection of the money was on the up and up, that an offering was really collected, and that all the money given was accounted for.⁵

As it was in Paul’s day, so it is in our own. We’ve got to be able to trust that our gift will be handled with integrity.

In a transaction between a giver and a need, there is often a “go-between.” There is a missions agency or a church that will handle your gift and send it on to meet the need. When you give, you need to know that the way the “go-between” is entirely above reproach in the way it handles money.

- There is no arm-twisting or guilt motivations to give.
- There are multiple eyes on offerings.
- There are good controls on expenditures and an accepted budget.
- There is good oversight of personal spending accounts.

Integrity on the part of the “go-between” - in our case, this church - is a non-negotiable. Lack of integrity in money matters will sink the whole ship. It’s that important.

Remember. This matter of generosity will bring a tremendous rate of return. And we’ll give attention at the end to that return.

⁵ Accountability serves to protect us from temptations to which we might succumb. Financial mismanagement leads to dishonor and a stain on the church.

But, in addition to urging us to be fully prepared to give - by having money in hand - Paul also gives us the low-down on giving in extremely practical terms.

I want to walk through his comments with you, highlighting a rubber-meets-the-road mentality when it comes to giving.

The first thing he says may surprise you. He tells us, “*Give what you want to give.*”

The Low-Down on Giving (v. 7)

The Giving That God Loves (v. 7)

#1 - Give what you want to give (v. 7a)

[7] Each one must do JUST AS HE HAS PURPOSED IN HIS HEART...

It is up to each of us, before God, to determine what we are going to give to meet human need in Jesus’ Name and to resource Kingdom of God work.

Paul doesn’t impose a dollar figure or a percentage on the first century Corinthians or on us. And here is a great spot to say something about the tithe.

About the tithe...

“Tithing” is a word that you hear tossed around a lot at church, and I think it is important that we understand what the tithe is, biblically, and what the tithe means for us, today.

In the Old Testament, the tithe (the word means, simply, “a tenth”) was a tax.

The money raised by the tithe went to support the Jewish priesthood, which, in a theocracy, was the government. The tithe was an obligation.⁶

Corresponding to the Old Testament tithe, Paul tells Christians to support the government under which they live by paying taxes.

We are to pay our taxes today for the same reason the Old Testament Jews tithed: to keep the government running.

But, in Old Testament times there were often special projects that needed funding. There were needy people to be helped. Sometimes, someone wanted to give a voluntary gift to the Lord.

These were all referred to as “free-will” offerings. As the words imply, they were gifts given according to what someone decided to give. Or, as Paul says here, **“just as he has purposed in his heart.”**

The formula for Christian giving today is just what Paul says here: Give what you have decided to give.

If there was ever a place where the mention of a tithe would make sense, it is here in 2 Corinthians 8-9 where the whole section is about giving money. Paul doesn’t mention it.

No set percentage and no set amount is suggested for the support of God’s work. Not 5% or 10% or 20% or 40%. Not \$10 or \$100 or \$1,000 or \$10,000. Give what you want to give.

The second conviction about giving follows.

#2 - Don’t give what you don’t want to give (v. 7b)

[7] Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, NOT GRUDGINGLY OR UNDER COMPULSION...

In other words, don’t give what you don’t want to give.

⁶ The Old Testament was very explicit about tithing, and there were several different tithes required of a Jewish citizen. The “whole tithe” represented between 22% and 30% of a Jew’s annual income.

Nobody here is forcing you to give. If you don’t want to give something, don’t give it. In the church, there is to be no compulsion or pressure on anyone to give.

If we are only giving because of an external arm-twisting or a guilty conscience, there will be no joy. And if nothing else is clear from the Bible, it is clear that God wants us to give joyfully.

In a few minutes, we’re going to be finished here today. And as we all walk out, I hope that we all leave convinced that God wants us to smile when we give.

#3 - Smile when you give that (v. 7c)

[7] Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion; FOR GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER.

God wants you to have a great time with your giving.

The phrase, **“God loves a cheerful giver”** doesn’t mean that God doesn’t stingy people. No. God loves stingy people, too.

But, God especially enjoys someone whose heart overflows in happy generosity.

This is the man or the woman who gives to help a person in need, who gives to the church, who gives to support someone who tells others about Jesus, and giggles with delight!

She thinks to herself, *“What a treat to be able to give toward what God is doing in this church.”* He thinks, *“I can’t believe that I have the privilege of giving money to meet this person’s need.”*

God enjoys our generosity, but not when we give through clenched teeth.

Now, what I’ve just said might strike you as a little odd, because the net effect of what I’ve just said might seem to limit giving.

I've said that we can't play the tithe card, because the tithe is the tax.⁷ We should give what we want to give, not give what we don't want to give - and that we are to give cheerfully or not at all.

All of this is true, but the effect will NOT be to limit giving. And that's because of the promise of a GREAT return on investment when we give.

I'll mention two more important things about giving before we get to the benefits of giving.

Truth About Planting and Harvesting (v. 6)

[6] Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.⁸

Sacrificial giving brings a rich harvest

Here's that plant scene, again. Only it's not a home garden. It's a farmer whose family's survival depends on his farm's harvest.

In the ancient world, the farmer didn't go to the seed store to buy seed. He would keep some of the last season's harvest in a secret place to use as seed for sowing when the rains came.

That seed could have been used for food to feed his hungry family. But if he had used the stowed away seed, there would have been no planting and no harvest the next season.

He knew that the only way to get a harvest was to place that precious seed into the soil.

The agricultural truth is obvious, but Paul isn't writing about wheat and oats. He's writing about giving money to fund ministry and to meet needs. To give money is to sow seed.

Sure, we could use the money we plan on giving for other things. But if we do that, there will be no harvest.

When we give money to meet people's needs in Jesus' Name and to resource ministry, that money isn't lost. It is invested. It's sown.

Think again about the seed.

Extravagant giving brings a rich harvest

The farmer's seed doesn't do anything. It just sits there.

But put it in the soil with the right temperature and moisture and life breaks through the hard husk of the seed.

It's the same thing with money. Obviously, there is nothing alive about money. It just sits there. Inert.

But, when we place our money into the soil of human need or into the soil of Jesus-centered ministry, this lifeless thing bears fruit.

It produces a harvest. And the kind of harvest we can expect from our giving is directly tied to the manner of our sowing.

If some farmer isn't all that concerned about his harvest, he'll throw out a little bit of seed. But what farmer doesn't want an abundant harvest? Farmers sow extravagantly.

And, yes, we want a rich, bountiful harvest. And the only way to reap a bountiful harvest is to sow, to give, extravagantly.

And in case you're thinking something like, "*But I don't have anything to give!*" listen. We've all heard now that we are each to be prepared to give.

But we should know, too, that God is committed to ensuring that those who want to give have something to give.

⁷ If Paul didn't play the tithe card (and Jesus never did, either), then maybe we shouldn't.

⁸ See Galatians 6:7, the law of the harvest.

God's Extravagant Supply (vv. 8-11a)

[8] And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed

[9] HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ABIDES FOREVER.⁹

[10] Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food¹⁰ will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness¹¹ [11] you will be enriched in everything for all liberality...

No. The Bible does not teach that the generous Christian will always be assured of such a high standard of living that she or he will be able to give money to others.

The Apostle Paul - who wrote these words - was a generous Christian, but he often had to depend on the generosity of others.¹²

The promise is that if you have a heart for generosity, God will see to it that you will always have the means to engage in some kind of good work; that there will always be some way for you to be a blessing.

It may be with money, or it may be with a helping hand, a warm smile, a strong back, or a fervent prayer. But God will provide a way for you to give. He will supply you with seed to sow for a rich harvest.

And the three specific harvests he mentions here are the kinds of harvests we all long to see.

⁹ People are often shocked when they first realize that this verse is not speaking about God, but man!

¹⁰ As he describes the food supply line - seed to bread - Paul reminds us that all good gifts come from God. It is God who has supplied you with "seed" (i.e. - the money or the material resources you are investing for His purposes) and it is God who will use that "seed" to bring blessing to people, for His sake.

¹¹ Paul combines words and phrases from several O.T. passages (Isaiah 55:10; Hosea 10:12)

¹² Paul's own experience - as an apostle! - argues against understanding that we are guaranteed an income large enough to be limitlessly charitable. (Phil. 4:12; 2 Cor. 11:23-33)

The Benefits of Giving (vv. 11-14)

Giving Meeting Needs in Jesus' Name (v. 12)

[12] For the ministry of this service is...FULLY SUPPLYING THE NEEDS OF THE SAINTS

The Corinthians had the satisfaction of knowing that their financial gift would meet the needs of suffering brothers and sisters in far-away Jerusalem.

Today, when you give, you are supporting the work of Jesus and you are meeting human need in His Name.

- When you give to Northwest you are giving to support a staff that is committed to serving you, your teenagers, and your children. You are supporting missionaries who take the Gospel to some far-off places like India and Thailand, Marshall High School and Morocco.
- When you give to Encuentro, you're helping us serve Spanish speakers right here in San Antonio.
- When you give to the ministries of the Food Pantry, Bread and Water, and the Benevolence Fund, you're serving the poor.

What a great harvest! Sow money and harvest service. By giving money, you are sharing Jesus' love with the people He loves.

Giving money also brings a harvest of praise to God.

Giving Brings Glory to God (vv. 11b, 12b, 13a)

[11] you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing THANKSGIVING TO GOD. [12] For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through MANY THANKSGIVINGS TO GOD. [13] Because of the proof given by this ministry they will GLORIFY GOD for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all

I visited with someone recently who received groceries for his family and a bus pass. We prayed together. When I finished, he just said, *“Thank You, Jesus.”* Your generosity prompted his praise.

Missionaries frequently write to tell us how they praise God for our financial partnership.

And think of this. When someone we support - overseas or stateside - shares the good news of Jesus with someone who trusts in the Lord and receives the gift of eternal life, they worship God, a direct result of your having given financially.

God takes the money you give (what Jesus once called *“the mammon of unrighteousness”*) and uses it to prompt worship.

Paul lists one more harvest. Sowing money into the lives of others produces a harvest of love.

Giving Grows Love (v. 14)

[14] while THEY ALSO, by prayer on your behalf, YEARN FOR YOU because of the surpassing grace of God in you.

It’s not unusual for someone here to approach me with a gift to give to someone else, because they want to give anonymously. Now I understand the desire to give anonymously. Sometimes, giving secretly is exactly the way to give.

But we’re wrong if we think that all giving should be anonymous. It sure wasn’t in the matter of the Jerusalem relief offering.

The Jerusalem Christians knew full well that the Corinthian Christians had given to meet their need.¹³

And because they knew who was doing the giving, bonds of love were established between Jerusalem and Corinth, between Jews and Gentiles.

¹³ Romans 16:26 indicates that Paul was going to travel through Corinth to collect money for an offering for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem. They did end up actually giving!

It’s not wrong for you to let the person you are helping know that it is you who is helping.

Send a cashier’s check in the mail if you want to. But there’s nothing wrong with walking up to a friend and shoving a \$5 bill or a check for \$500 into his hand while you tell him,

“The Lord has put you on my heart lately. I know you’ve been going through a tough time. I wanted to let you know how much I love you and your family.”

Your relationship with that friend will never be the same. Sow the seed of giving and reap a harvest of love.

Giving money, the grace of generosity, enriches us as we give. It allows us to meet needs in Jesus’ Name, furthers the work of the Gospel, prompts worship, and grows love.

And how does Paul wrap up this chapter’s worth of urging us to lead generous lives? Listen.

Conclusion:

[15] Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

We don’t give because we have to or because we ought to. We don’t give motivated by guilt or due to peer pressure. We sure don’t give to earn God’s love.

We give because our God is a giving God. He loved the world so much that He GAVE His only begotten Son.

And we get to partner with Him in what He’s doing in the world by imitating His giving ways.