

A New Community: “As Any Had Need”

June 25, 2023 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:44 ESV).

Christ The Giver

Into the world He came. A world given to us by God. Made with his voice. God, the giver of Creation, who gives us breath...gives the world the gift of His Son.

And into the world He came. Jesus Christ. God the Son. And he gives. He gives his time to talk to a thirsting woman by a well, a lame man by a pool, and a tax-collector in a tree. He gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and health to the hurting. He gives the gospel—the story and offer of unconditional life and eternal salvation—to everyone who believes. In the garden that dreadful night, He gives up his struggling human will in deference to God’s divine will, and He gives his life unto death so the dead may find a life of their own.

A Giving People, Clothed With Christ The Giver

And we—the redeemed, we—the transported, we—the rescued and reclaimed, we—the baptized have put on Christ like a glorious spiritual coat (Gal 3:27). A coat of many colors. A coat made up of the finest strands. And for this reason, giving is a part of the fabric of the Christian life (Rom 12:13; James 2:14-17). It’s no wonder that the same Spirit that gives life to our mortal bodies, that indwells us to give life to our spiritual bodies, also indwells his church; and so, together, we are known throughout the world as givers (Acts 4:34-35; 11:29-30). We give our attention to others because we serve a selfless Savior. We use our gifts to build up the body and inspire the world, because we are first gifted by the God who purchased the body and loves the world. And in 1

Corinthians 16, Paul gives instructions not just to Corinth but to all the churches of Galatia to take up a collection to be used to serve the financial needs of others. And the motivation for all of this is so abundantly clear: we take our cue from Christ.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9 ESV).

Reasons NOT To Give

Without a spiritual mindset, it is so easy to be stingy. Pummeled every day by messaging from a self-centered consumer culture, we can so easily lose sight of who we are. The storyline of Christ the Giver gets drowned out by one-liners drawn from a secular culture.

The first line that worldly thinking places in our minds centers on a sense of entitlement. “Whatever I have is mine to use for my own pleasure.” We live in a world that tells us greed is good, that whoever dies with the most toys wins, and that your status and identity is determined by your bottom line. And But surely we all remember that passage in the Psalms where God says

“Every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all its fullness are mine” (Ps 50:10-12).

If God is the creator of all then He is the owner of all (Deut 10:14; Ps 24:1). If God owns all, that changes how I perceive the house, and car, and money in my pocket.

The second line that swirls in our heads is born of fear. “If I give anything away, I will have less.” Anything I give away is lost. Whatever I share is gone.

It makes sense. But in the kingdom of God, it is completely wrong. It is individualized thinking rather than communal thinking. For in communal thinking, if we all give, then we all have enough! In fact, the only way to ensure that we all have enough is if we give. The self-focused view of goods is actually to our own detriment. God taught the Israelites this important fact when he provided manna from heaven. But it came with two stipulations: (1) do not store up any for tomorrow, and (2) only eat as much as you need, so that there will be enough for everyone. What a different picture than we get from Black Friday shootouts in the Wal-Mart parking lot. Our unsatisfied culture that constantly drives us to consume and hoard is both bad for the community and bad for ourselves. But God changes our viewpoint. Instead of a scarcity mindset (where there

is never enough), we adopt a sharing mindset, in which there is always enough for you, because I hold what you need in my hands. And you hold what I need in your hands.

We are stewards, not owners. And the first rule of stewardship is to ensure that what has been placed in my trust will be used as instructed. And what are the instructions? “Freely you have received; freely give.” “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.” We are blessed to bless others. Our response to God must be “how can I use the gifts you have given me to your glory?”

The last line that swirls in our heads is a judgment. “God helps those who help themselves,” we say. Try as you might, you won’t find that verse in Scripture. It’s not Paul. It’s Ben. Ben Franklin. There is an irony in living by that rule and thinking it is Scripture. You see, even if we went by that rule, we would hear in the Lord’s prayer the need to give: “Forgive us our debts” (goes the prayer) “as we forgive our debtors.” It seems from that verse alone that if you want God to help you with your debts, you should be one who helps debtors.

But we don’t even have to go there, because, in reality, the line is wrong. In fact, God helps those who *cannot* help themselves. There’s the irony. God’s help comes when we confess Ben Franklin to be wrong. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. This means the first requirement to receive God’s grace is to acknowledge that you have need of it, you are not able to produce it, and cannot live without it. To put it another way, if God is the owner of all, and we are stewards, not owners, then we are blessed for one main reason: to bless others.

Alternative Universe: The Ethic of The Early Church

Isn’t that the attitude, the lifestyle, portrayed here in our text? “And all the believers were together and had all things in common; they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:45 ESV).

The trouble with models is that they describe an ideal that never quite measures up in real life. Jesus gave us the model prayer. It’s easy to say the words forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; it’s quite another to forgive the slumlord who is breathing down our neck—or to forgive the creditors demanding with interest payments we are unable to make.

And so it is with this model. Communal life has problems because it is made up of people, and people bring their baggage with them. The model of ideal communal life given here in Acts 2 doesn’t always look like this in real life. In fact, it doesn’t even last

5 chapters. Because when Chapter 6 rolls around, the giving and sharing are so unequal, and the needs piling up so high, the Apostles have to appoint servants (from the Greek word “Deacon” which means “servant”) to regulate things and to sort it all out (Acts 6:1).

But models exist for a reason. They remind us of what we are aiming for. They hold up a torch for weary travelers in the dark, lighting the path toward a better way. Sense the attitude among these earliest disciples. Feel the motivation. There is only one thing that can cause people to act this way, or—more accurately—to live this way.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9 ESV).

Paul’s Appeal in 2 Cor 8-9: This Is Who We Are

This beautiful passage is set in the middle of a chapter where Paul is writing a fundraising letter. I am amazed at how different his letter is from most fundraising letters I receive. Here is one that came in the mail just a week ago—citing the distressing economic signals, the dire need in which they find themselves, and even the adrenaline rush that comes with doing good for others.

And Paul appeals to none of that. He doesn’t mention how hard things are in going in the economy. He doesn’t butter you up with how good it will make you feel to be a good-deed-doer in society. He says giving is in the life-blood of who we are. It’s what we do.

Do you know what Paul does say in these two chapters? First, he says giving is a grace (*charis*) and a blessing (*eulogia*)—an honor, a privilege, a way to show the grace of God. Paul says God’s grace is abounding everywhere, and this is your chance to get in on the ground floor (2 Cor 8:9).

Second, he says giving is an act of fellowship (*koinonia*), where we take part in the story of Christ and the story Christ is telling through one another (2 Cor 8:4).

Third, he says giving is a ministry, a service (*diakonia*), a way to glorify God by being his hands and feet in the world (2 Cor 8:4; 9:5)

Do you see? Do you see that everything in all creation is not a story about you. It’s a story about God. And we are his instruments. He pours into us the gift of preaching,

the gift of encouragement, the gift of hospitality. And we use our gifts and they produce. They result in the gift of work, the gift of money and resources. And when we give, we renounce our addiction to greed and we announce our partnership in the kingdom of God. We scatter seed upon the ground, never expecting a return for our benefit, but fully expecting a harvest for His benefit. Our giving tells the story of Jesus. And the story of Jesus changes the world.