

## The Spirituality of Apocalyptic Stewardship and Material Grace

God loves a cheerful giver! It is more blessed to give than to receive! Who thought that stuff up? When I was growing up, my minister declared on many a stewardship Sunday that somebody in the Bible thought it up, but I don't know that I always trusted my minister when he was preaching. He came up with some pretty outrageous stuff from up there in the pulpit. For an adolescent boy, this thing about being more blessed to give than to receive was right up there with "just try those butter beans, you'll like them!" I'm talking outrageous stuff. Stuff that doesn't even make common sense. All I could think about was Christmas morning. On Christmas morning, it sure was better to receive than to give, wasn't it? Tell the truth. I couldn't imagine getting up and being told that there were 10 packages with my name on it under the tree, but I had to give those packages away and receive no packages in return. That's Christmas giving and no Christmas receiving. Who thinks that's better? I remember how annoyed my brothers and I were when Christmas happened to fall on a Sunday. We actually had to *give* a couple of hours of church away from our toys. I grew up Baptist, and it seemed like sometimes we were in church all day on Sundays, even holiday Sundays. We were giving time in church when I can tell you that we would have felt a whole lot more blessed to have received time back with those toys underneath the Christmas tree. I tell you, when it got to be around 1:00 on Christmas Sunday morning, and not only was I still in church, but that Baptist preacher of ours was just getting up to preach his sermon, I can tell you what I would have given...I would have *given* anything to have been Presbyterian.

Good times are about receiving. How about your birthday? Is it not more blessed on your birthday to be given to, not to be giving away? Your birthday was bless-ed when you receiv-ed.

Of course there was that one exception, the rule about giving grief. My older brother thought it was blessed to give me grief, or to give me a knock up side the head every now and then, but I don't think that's what Paul was thinking of when he quoted that it's more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

Paul is a good person to begin our story of stewardship because Paul is focused on the future, the long term future. There are different kinds of stewardship in the New Testament. I think there are two key ones which, at least for me, suggest different ways of being in the world. And in this case I am not just talking about stewardship as money. Most people, when they hear the word STEWARDSHIP, they think of the companion term: MONEY. And then, many of them start thinking of something else--like how to keep more of their money for themselves--how to give less of their money to you. That is a natural, human reaction. People work hard to earn their keep in the world. Why should they not focus on keeping as much as they can to better their world. Their particular, individual world.

It is because stewardship so often means money, and money so often provokes a posture of self-preservation that we have to reorient how people think of stewardship. We must rebuild the connection between stewardship and spirituality. And that is where the New Testament can come back into the stewardship picture. I want to press the case for thinking of stewardship in terms of apocalyptic spirituality.

Because the New Testament is filled with apocalyptic materials, I would say that both of the kinds of stewardship that I am thinking of are apocalyptic in their orientation. I know we don't like to differentiate between the kind of ethics that develops in the Gospel narratives about Jesus and the kind of ethics that develops in the Pauline letters, but I do think there is something distinct about the ethics of Christian stewardship as it develops from these two genres of material. Both are apocalyptic. But they push different ethical agendas when it comes to the matter of stewardship. It is helpful to have an understanding of both. We are more Pauline Christians than we are, say, Markan Christians, so it is with Paul that I'll spend most of my time--Paul and what I will call the spirituality of material grace. But let's start with Jesus.

While Jesus speaks to a developing community on the move, following the lead of a man with no where to lay his head, a radical pulled toward the cross like a moth to an apocalyptic flame, Paul is establishing communities to celebrate the life and Lordship of Jesus and he hopes, it appears, to extend the life and security of those communities into the foreseeable future.

Because he is indeed apocalyptic, he does not expect that future to go on and on forever, but he does expect it to go on. And he knows that for the church to endure during this time, it needs support. It needs strong stewards. Perhaps it is too trite and simplistic to say this. All right, it is too trite and simplistic to say this, but I'm going to dance out on this limb any way for reasons of provocation and for reasons of hoping to keep you awake at this late hour in the day. While Jesus is championing a kingdom, Paul is establishing a church. Stewardship in those two realities can look rather different.

Now, the word apocalypse is a noun that means "revelation." Hence, the great Christian Apocalypse is better known as the Book of "Revelation." When the adjective apocalyptic is used, it tends to describe the revelation of some particular thing. I would suggest that it is the revelation of a thing's ultimate intent, the intent for which it has been eternally designed. That is the intent for which it has its transcendental, or we might say heavenly purpose. An apocalypse reveals the end time intent of God for humankind and creation. An apocalyptic stewardship would therefore reveal the end time intent that God has for the purpose of creation and the humans who inhabit creation. What we want to do is 1. determine what that end time intent is and 2. find a way to prefigure that future intent in our present, real time. As they are both apocalyptic, the teachings of Jesus as they appear in the Gospels and the intentions of Paul as they appear in his letters, indicate the same end time, stewardship intent. The gifts of creation and the humans who inhabit creation are for the purpose of glorifying God. To be good stewards of a thing or a person or a cause is to work with it, develop it, nurture it, use it so that it ultimately glorifies God. When we use our gifts, our resources, our talents, our very selves in this way, we reveal God's love and demonstrate God's end time intent in our present thinking and living. So, at point 1, the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul point us in exactly the same direction. It's at point 2, because of the differences in their contexts, that we get a little bit of a different nuance as to exactly how we live stewardship out. In Mark's Jesus, we have a stewardship that directs us to use our resources so that we become conduits of God's kingdom power that cuts through the boundaries that separate humans from each other and therefore

humans from God no matter the cost. And so we get the model of stewardship, Jesus himself, opening the Gospel of Mark by touching lepers who are supposed to be consigned by levitical code outside the camp. He declares that he can forgive sins, an ability the scribes who have come down from Jerusalem charge as blasphemous since such a right belongs only to God. He consorts with tax collectors and sinners, joining them in their houses and even in table fellowship. Indeed, he even calls one to be a disciple. He breaks the sabbath traditions by allowing his disciples to work and even performing himself the work of healing on such a day. Stewardship is about using the gifts and resources God has given you. How do you use your resources and gifts? You put them in harm's way if that is the only way you can change the world so that it more properly reflects, more properly *reveals*, God's kingdom reality here on earth. With this kind of apocalyptic stewardship ethic driving him, it is no wonder that by 3:6 the leaders determine to put him to death. And yet he continues to steward his gifts in the most dangerous of directions. He is almost sacrificing himself it seems for the kingdom cause. No wonder, his family thinks he has gone mad. And then, the coup de grace: he crosses over to the Gentile side of the sea and apparently to the wrong side of the socio-political equation by giving Gentiles status as God's people as a part of God's kingdom. From chapter 7 on, this kind of inclusive behavior changes the stakes even more dramatically. Do you have gifts? Do you have talents? Do you have resources? If you do, use them to break the reality of God's kingdom through the oppressive and harsh realities of the world in which you live. That is what your talents are for. That is what your resources are for. That is what your money is for. That is stewardship. That is scary stewardship. That is apocalyptic stewardship: type A.

There was this famous debate between an epochal German New Testament Scholar and his wunderkind student in the early decades of the twentieth century. Their conversation revolved around the question as to whether apocalyptic was the mother of Christian Theology? Since this is a talk about stewardship, I will not dwell on the debate very long. But I want to point out, however, that what they had to say to one another very has an impact on the decisions we make today about living lives of Christian stewardship. I tend to take the side of the student

in the debate. His name was Ernst Kasemann. Kasemann argued essentially that Christians had become too individualistic, that they had become so focussed on themselves, in our language, using their resources and their talents, to better themselves and their own salvation standing before God that they lost track of the world in which they lived. Christians had become spiritually preoccupied with themselves and being “saved.” I think one of the points he was making was that this happens when a people become less apocalyptic and become more existential. That is, when their primary focus becomes their existential standing before God. That preoccupies them to such a degree that they no longer have that concern for the world which was key to Jesus’ ministry as the Gospels reveal that ministry. Kasemann’s key case in point were the Corinthian Christians. Paul had to redirect them and was struggling to do so because they had become so focused on their spiritual salvation that they had become already “saved.” And being saved in the spirit meant that it no longer mattered what one did, or did not do, in the body. How can you expect ethical behavior, how can you expect stewardship behavior that is ultimately behavior about using your resources to help others when people don’t care about the material world except to enjoy it, and because their real world is the spiritual, they can enjoy the material world in a destructive way rather than fight for the real world in a socially and politically constructive way. I think one of Kasemann’s points was this: we are all in danger of becoming Corinthian Christians now. We are all in danger of favoring an existencialized spiritual stewardship--the stewardship of me and my relationship with God--over apocalyptic stewardship--the stewardship of using everything I have to transform my world. Why? Because the focus in contemporary Christianity, too, too often is on our existential saved state, on whether we have that proper individual spiritual relationship with God. Because in such a Corinthian Christian world view that individual spiritual relationship with God is all that matters. That individual relationship with God is what’s real. So that is where we start even our stewardship campaign. We ask people to think about their individual relationships with God and how they can strengthen those individual relationships with God by giving to God’s church. We ask folk to become a steward to build a church, build a program, build a mission that can save individual

souls because that's where the focus is, on individual souls, on saving them, and collecting enough of them, so that they can pool their resources to save as many other individual souls as possible.

Not that there's anything wrong with that! Indeed, there isn't. That is a key part of what our stewardship in a broad sense is all about. But Kasemann pointed out that the apocalyptic sensibility that gave sustenance to the developing Christian faith as it was taught by Jesus and promoted by Paul had a focus on something much larger than our individual lives. Its focus was on an objective reality out there in the future, to which we were and are accountable to here in the present. That objective reality is the kingdom of God. It is the future reality that drove Jesus' ministry. It is the vision of a new world, the transformation of this world according to that vision. And that transformation happens when people participate with what God is doing in the world by using their gifts, their resources, their money, their selves to breaking that future into the present moment. In the book of Revelation, John is very clear when he talks about how the draconian direction of the world is overturned into the hopeful direction that God intends. He notes that the people of faith conquer, that is, they transform--how--by the blood of the Lamb--by testifying to what God has done AND by the very work of that testimony. Their testimony is their stewardship. Their testimony to the kingdom of God is how they help usher in the kingdom of God. Not by just talking but by living the reality of the kingdom, by using every fiber of their being, their resources, their talents to live the faith they believe. That kingdom vision sharpens the world's focus.

Even the Sermon on the Mount, thought to represent a more internal, spiritualized view of the Christian faith that Luke's Sermon on the mount has this kingdom orientation. Many point out that since Jesus says in Luke, for example, Blessed are the poor, and in Matthew, Jesus says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, that Matthew has taken the focus off of changing the world and just changing the spirits of people in the world. Matthew's therefore looks toward an internal righteousness. Let's make ourselves righteous. Hopefully, some other stewards will take care of the world and its poor.

Let us though look at Matthew from the lens of the Kingdom. Just because righteousness comes from the inside does not mean it stays there. It is, as Matthew's sermon projects it, an individual orientation that presumes a socially transformative result. For example, Matthew presents these apocalyptic beatitudes as demands for present action that imitates the kingdom oriented action of Jesus (4:23-25). They will therefore, though they prefigure realities of the kingdom, live themselves out physically and socially in the life of the community. Meekness, purity of heart, poverty of spirit are imperatives to be initiated as works (5:16; 7:24-27) of better righteousness. And as *works* of better righteousness they function to help distinguish Matthew's Jewish community from the surrounding Jewish communities. As the members of the community *do* this righteousness the community transforms itself into the image of this righteousness. Such a distinction can only be realized if these beatitudes have a living, *working* reality which demonstrates that this community has been transformed by its Torah interpretation in a way that others have not. These beatitudes, in other words, realize a practical, social benefit. These beatitudes don't allow God's people a spiritual escape from the troubles of the world; these beatitudes make God's people responsible for the world.

Now, what about Paul? As I have said, Paul, too, is apocalyptic, but he is apocalyptic in a different way when it comes to matters of stewardship. Paul's stewardship certainly has in mind a gentler approach as it aims to build up the body of Christ here on earth. While Jesus seemed to be putting his body at risk on the kingdom's behalf at almost every moment in his earthly ministry, Paul wants to make sure that the church that is developing to celebrate and worship that ministry survives to tell his story and witness to his Lordship well into the future. So, while Paul certainly believes God's future provides the template for how we live in the present, he anticipates a lengthier present that is rich with opportunities for building and strengthening a fellowship of faith.

There are, though, those who do not present so generous a picture of Paul's work as they compare it to Jesus' stewardship strategy. Some scholars have argued that while Jesus came preaching the coming of God's "now and not yet" kingdom and the requirement that humans act

in a particular way in response to that coming, Paul preached instead the gospel of a risen Christ which focused more on considerations of individual salvation and morality through a living “in” that Christ. In other words, that Paul took Jesus’ apocalyptic sensibility and refashioned it into an existential sensibility. Indeed, in his work entitled, *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, Gerd Theissen makes the comment that a radical shift occurred between the time of Jesus’ preaching and that of the Pauline churches. And that the shift was spurred on by Paul himself. Theissen argues that Jesus’ followers were essentially, like Jesus, wandering charismatics, who proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom and demanded that humans radically alter their lives and their world in expectation of that coming. Paul, however, with his missionary focus moved from the rural world of Galilean Palestine where Jesus’ ministry began, to the urban cities of the Hellenistic world, tempered that radicalism and adjusted the message so that the emphasis was placed less on the affects of an objective kingdom and more on the results of a life lived in Christ. Theissen calls this kind of Christian thought, “love patriarchalism.” He writes,

But it is love patriarchalism to which we owe the surviving institutions of the church. Quite successfully, and not without wisdom, this love patriarchalism tempered early Christian radicalism to a degree that made it possible for the Christian faith to become a practicable form of living for men and women in general.<sup>1</sup>

This concern for individuality also concerns those who claim that Paul’s orientation on individual salvation led to a move away from concern for the world. Particularly, Paul’s pessimism about the sinful quality of human nature appears to direct hope to an otherworldly agenda and regime rather than hope for transformation in this world. Note, for instance his instruction that slaves apparently remain in their condition, that persons obey the governments that reign over them, without consideration for the quality of that government, etc. The question that arises, then, is simply, does Paul have a view of the Kingdom of God, that, as it does in the Synoptics, challenges believers to a transformative attitude in the world as well as the hope of a

---

1. Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 58-9.

transformation in the world beyond? It is in this light that we go searching Paul's understanding of stewardship as it relates to the Kingdom of God.

A good place to start is with 1 Corinthians 15, because here the phrase kingdom of God occurs more frequently than anywhere else in Paul's letters. Here, already, as we see Paul battle opponents in Corinth, we can begin to glimpse that life in Christ for him is much more than a contemplative endeavor. We can go back as far as the landmark consideration of the chapter by Karl Barth in his book: *Resurrection of the Dead*. Only about half of the book concerns the first 14 chapters of the letter. Barth centers most of his attention and Paul's thought in chapter 15. He establishes that the phrase "from God" is determinative for understanding the first 14 chapters. Fighting prideful enthusiasm among the spiritualists in Corinth, the apostle demands that the believers recognize their abilities as gifts *from God*, gifts which carry with them particular behavioral responsibilities. That's stewardship. You don't own your gifts for yourselves; every gift, every resource you have is from God and God gave you the gift for a reason beyond yourself.

The Corinthian Christians, though, refused to accept the future resurrection of the dead, which at 15:50 is directly connected with the kingdom of God. They didn't need any such future kingdom because Paul himself had taught them that they were "in Christ", they had already been crucified and raised with Christ, and therefore already enjoyed Christ's spiritual victory over the evil powers of sin and death. Spiritually, then, sin and death, in them, had already been overcome. They are already spiritually perfect. They are free, therefore to do as they wish in the body, because their spirits are free from the contaminants of this world.

For Paul, however, freedom becomes a *freedom* lived *for* God, not a *freedom from* all restraint. Life for the believer should be oriented around discipleship in a certain behavior towards the neighbor. In this way chapters 1-14 might be described as ethical mandates for Christian living. The mandates are not important because they are "right" as such; their validity stems from the fact that they are an outgrowth of the believer's relationship with the kingdom of God.

How do we know this? Barth points us towards chapter 15. Correct Christian behavior is founded upon a correct Christian understanding of the resurrection of the dead. In speaking of such, Barth asserts that Paul is speaking of the last things, as the qualitative end which marks all of time that precedes it, *not* as an end of time at the termination of history. He is, in other words, talking about the kingdom, but doing so in a new way.

The Corinthians are denying the reality of the general resurrection of the dead, alleging that Jesus' own resurrection was an isolated miracle which has no bearing on the remainder of reality. For Paul, Jesus' appearances to the disciples, while not represented as proofs of his resurrection, indicated that the church is founded on the revelation of that resurrection. The revelation was "from God" and cannot be denied, because to do so would deny the very validity of the church.

Resurrection becomes simultaneously the basis of our faith, as Paul has established it, and the divine horizon of our existence. That which has been effected in Christ promises that death now is no more than a deep sleep, and the future resurrection of the body is an awakening from that sleep. As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall we be made alive; Barth is careful to point out that while the former half of the announcement indicates a present troublesome condition, the latter is a promise in which we may hope. But the present hope is integrally tied into the reality of the resurrection. In other words, Paul's vision of the reality of the kingdom marks present human behavior, which means there does lie a connection between this eschatological hope and the present human predicament.

The New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann agreed that Paul was adjusting the way in which he looked at the kingdom, but that he was looking at this kingdom and that he was understanding how the kingdom reality must be adjusted so that the primary concern is not apocalypticism but present human action. He says that Paul's primary focus is centered in chapter 13. For if it is true, he argues, that Paul uses the eschatological to give foundational support for the ethical mandates of the letter, then certainly the climax of the material is in just that ethical core.

Love is shown, by its juxtaposition with chapter 15, to be the ultimate possibility for human activity because it has become an eschatological event. It is inextricably associated with the end time. The kingdom. Bultmann boldly states that the preaching of love is the reality of the resurrection of the dead.

Barth and Bultmann may disagree as to whether chapter 15 or chapter 13 is the climax of the letter, but their place of agreement is quite instructive. They agree that Paul is concerned about the resurrection of the dead, the end event that colors all present activity. *In other words, Paul's discussions about the end time are not escapist and otherworldly, they have a purpose, the specific purpose of directing present human, ethical behavior on both an individual and interrelational level. The end time discussion does not end in transcendent meditation, it ends in love. The indicative reality of the end time demands human ethical response in the present time.* And that response, I'm calling it stewardship, is directed by love. Not love towards oneself, but love expressed to God's people and God's world.

What Paul does not have to give is a primer on what it means to be a Christian to the Christians in Corinth. He starts out chapter 9 by telling them, "I don't need to tell you anything you don't already know. We celebrate the fact that God gave us something tremendous and outstanding in the gift of God's son. God gave. We received. And we are blessed by that reception, blessed by being in relationship with God now and forever. That's the good news. God not only gave God's son to be incarnate with us, a part of history with us, God then gave the life of God's Son up on the cross so that we might receive life. You already know this!

"I don't even have to tell you what to do with what you have been given. For you know that the receiving of the gift is not the end of the story. You weren't just given a gift; you were given a responsibility."

I saw a movie once called *Pay It Forward*. It was about someone who had received grace, and instead of paying it backwards by saying thank you to the person for something that had already been done, this person recognized the importance of paying the gift forward. In other words, after saying thank you for what had been done, this person realized the importance of

saying thank you by doing something similar for someone he would encounter in a future situation of need. THAT is the responsibility we have with the gift of God's Son. We pay that gift forward. To be sure, we are thankful, and coming to worship, sharing in worship, singing and praising, is one of the fundamental ways in which we say thank you to God for God's wondrous gift. But we also know that we can say thank you for that gift when we leave worship by paying the gift forward. We can express our gratitude by what we do and by how we live in the future. We can show our appreciation to God by doing for someone else what God has done for us.

Paul knows we know all this. We already know Christ died for us. We already know Christ gave his life to change the lives of those struggling in his world and ours. We already know that Christ not only changed us, but that Christ set in motion the transformation of human history. That is why we are gathered here. That is why we are celebrating today. That is our joy! **THAT** is the gift that is so precious we don't have the words to describe it.

We share our joy by sharing the indescribable gift, by *becoming* a Christ-like gift for others in the way that God gave Christ as a gift to us. That is how we Christians celebrate. We share the joy by sharing the gift.

It's crazy to talk football during march madness, but football season is my favorite season. My favorite sports time of the year. You know how to celebrate a touchdown, don't you? You don't just run across the goal line. That moment happens so seldom, even for most NFL and College players, that you want to mark the event, right? Sure, you spend all this time studying and practicing and working out so that you can figure out a way to power through the other team's defense and crash into the end zone. So when you get there it is a monumental achievement. Even if you were planning for it, even if you were expecting it, it's gotta be something else when you finally make it. Now some people say stuff like, "act like you've been there before." Or, "act like you don't expect this to be a one time thing." Can you imagine telling that to someone who thought he might not get into heaven, but who suddenly finds himself sitting in the heavenly throne room. You think he isn't going to dance around and shout

a few hallelujahs. I can hear St. Peter now, announcing as you walk through those heavenly gates: “Go ahead! Act like you’ve never been here before, because you haven’t. Act crazy. Heaven is about being crazy happy, crazy with the gift of life.”

Even if you *expect* to be there with God, it’s still gonna be pretty awesome when it happens. I played high school football, or as I like to more honestly and accurately say, I suited up and watched other guys play high school football. I had a reserved seat on the bench. For home and away games. I was special. I was the coach’s crowd control monitor on the sideline. Everybody has a role to play, right? In the 10th grade, when I was still playing junior varsity football and still sitting on the sideline because I wasn’t good enough to play, I dreamed about one day crossing the goal line. I would have given anything to have had just one chance at getting close to it even. I can’t imagine how I would have celebrated had I been graced with the opportunity to cross into that little patch of pigskin promised land. I remember watching a great running back on our team who had crossed it so many times he just waltzed in and gave the ball to the referee and walked out, ho-hum, another touchdown. The coach liked that. The sports writers for the local papers liked that. Showed class. I was obviously not known as an athlete in high school, but I was known as a classy, little kid who did well in the classroom. Teachers could count on me knowing how to act. I know right now I would have acted like a fool had I made one single touchdown. I would have celebrated like crazy.

That’s how Paul thinks people ought to feel about this good news of God’s gift of God’s Son into their lives. Something *wonderful* had happened, so wonderful that you couldn’t keep it in. You HAD to celebrate. And you celebrated in two ways. You praised it up! And then you lived it out! You gave to others the grace that had been given to you. And you give it in a material way. We will explain what that material way looks like tomorrow.

### **BREAK**

There is, of course, a specific situation that surrounds Paul’s teaching about the blessedness of giving. Throughout Paul’s missionary journeys to Gentile communities, he has also had a pressing concern for the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. The

Corinthians, like many of the folk in Paul's Gentile communities, were wealthy in comparison with the believers in Palestine. Paul is attempting to get them to share some of their wealth with believers in Jerusalem even though Paul knows that these Corinthian Christians will never know, probably never even set eyes on their Christian counterparts in Jerusalem. Paul believes that by sharing of their resources, resources with which God has gifted them, they can show that they feel they are unified in the faith with the Jerusalem Christians. They can demonstrate their gratitude for all that God has given them by giving to God's less materially fortunate, and therefore show that they believe that even though they are Jew and Gentile, even though they separated by vast distances, they are still one community of faith, one body of Christ. By helping to alleviate the poverty of the Jerusalem Christians, the Corinthians would be helping to create and preserve the unity of the church. They could do for Jerusalem what God had done for them: share an indescribable gift of love. Wouldn't that be a cause for celebration!

Clearly, though, something has gone wrong. Paul is arguing a point as he writes this part of his letter. He's concerned about Macedonians coming with him on a visit to Corinth so instead of coming with the Macedonians himself, he sends an advance team of co-workers ahead to prepare the way.

Here's the situation. In an effort to get the Gentile Christians in Macedonia to support the collection for the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, Paul had bragged about how the believers in Corinth, after hearing his appeal, had promised to raise a generous gift. And the good news is, the Macedonians, though they were no where near as wealthy as the Corinthians, had responded. As one of my Ph.D. students, Jacob Cherian, now back in ministry in his homeland of Bangalore, India wrote about this text, the Macedonian generosity caught Paul by surprise precisely because their generosity was *disproportionate*. They gave beyond their capability. They did not themselves have a lot, were themselves in need, so they did not give out of their sufficiency. Most people give what they can afford to give. The Macedonians apparently gave what they could NOT afford to give. They were so overwhelmed by the grace of the gift of God's son in their lives and what that gift meant, that crazy with celebratory fervor, they gave

back with the same joy and generosity that they believed God had given to them. As Jacob went on to say, “Paul is impressed that these materially impoverished Christians, in the midst of grave distress, *begged* to be permitted to give from their already meager resources (8:4).” Who in the world would beg to give to others when they have major needs themselves?

The Macedonians would!

Jacob had a beautiful image to describe what was happening with the Macedonians. He likened them to a tree of grace that had been planted and nurtured by God. God had graced them with life and they had taken on that grace so completely that they became rooted like a tree in that grace, and now, they were bearing grace fruit. The Macedonians were exhibit A in grace fruit. Paul wanted the Corinthians to become Exhibit B.

The singer Madonna used to call herself “the Material Girl.” That was the title of a song she sang. We live, she sung, in a material world. Why not therefore be a material girl? Why not be someone who craved, stockpiled, and worshipped material treasures? Who would have thought that the preacher Paul and the pop singer Madonna would ever have anything in common! Madonna is a material girl. Amazingly, Paul wants the Corinthians, following the example of the Macedonians, to be Material Christians. That’s the song he is also singing. We live, he was singing, in a material world? But it is a world of material *grace*. God’s grace materialized in the person of God’s son. God’s grace materialized in the gift of blessed relationship with God, what we call salvation, that starts right now and finishes in eschatological glory with God forever, what we call heaven. If this is truly a material grace world, why not crave, stockpile, and share material grace? Why not let the grace we feel materialize into a kind of concrete grace that we can share with others? Why not plant, nurture, grow, and share grace fruit with those who are starving from both material and spiritual hunger? Why not become grace fruit ourselves by how we live our lives, by how we use the resources with which our lives have been gifted? That’s the question Paul is asking the Corinthians.

The Corinthians had started out giving with a bang. They had been VERY enthusiastic. That is why Paul started bragging about them to the Macedonians. But then the Corinthians fell

off in their giving and the Macedonians ended up being better givers than the Corinthians. Paul is concerned now because if some Macedonians were to accompany him on his visit to Corinth, both Paul and the Corinthians would be humiliated. The Macedonians would surely wonder why Paul had been praising these stingy believers for their gracious giving.

So, Paul treats the Corinthians like I remember my mom treating my two brothers and me when we were growing up. One of my mom's cardinal rules was, "you will not embarrass me in public." Now we knew this was an important rule because of the amount of time and energy my mom gave to declaring and enforcing this rule. We knew it, she knew it, and we knew going into every public situation we were going to live by it. Case closed. And yet, just before we went into any public situation of some consequence she STILL had to drill us to mind our manners, to behave properly, to sit still, sit up straight, etc.

Just so, Paul sends an advance team to Corinth. Just in case. He is, in essence, telling them: "yes, I know you know how to live out your faith, but just in case, I'm sending along some folk to remind you how to do it, because you will not embarrass me in public." Paraphrasing from Isaiah 55:10-11, he reminds them that God provides the seed for sowing. In other words, God provides material grace in their lives that they can share with others. As Jacob said: "For [Paul], the workings of God's extraordinary generosity, like a seed, must yield fruit--the plant of human generosity. God's grace seed planted among the Corinthians had already sprouted (1 Cor 3:5-10). God had used Paul to plant the seed of the gospel of God's grace." And so, "The Corinthians' earlier desire and action to start on the collection project was an evidence of God's grace. But this grace-plant (of their collection project) which had earlier sprouted now seemed stunted. Like a good farmer, Paul seeks to revitalize the plant by all available means. Thus he prods the Corinthians to complete this process till it bears the expected fruit of [material] grace." He prods them to become material grace-fruit on God's tree of communal life. He wants them to become material Christians. The collection will become their expression of material grace. In such a way they will become a blessing to the Jerusalem Christians in the same way that God has, through Christ, become a blessing to them. As Ernest Best puts it in his commentary, "Words of

blessing come easily; to bless by sharing our material possessions requires quite another attitude.” (84) It requires the attitude of a material Christian.

If the joy of giving to assist another is insufficient motivation, Paul offers more practical reasons. In verses 6-9, he declares that those who plant little grace fruit will harvest little grace fruit, but those who plant generously will themselves harvest generously. In other words, giving benefits the giver. Grace fruit is odd; what they have will be multiplied as they give it away. Not many things work like that, but perhaps the more important things do. Love works like that. The more you give it away the more it is multiplied in your own life. In fact, the ONLY way you can multiply love is by giving more and more of it away. Grace is like that. The more you extend it to others, the more it seems to come back in the oddest ways to you. Here, if the Gentiles give the material grace they have, money, they will receive what the poor in Jerusalem have, grace, love, and the powerful connection they have established with God through their historical relationship with the apostolic community and history.

The other practical reason for giving is that giving remakes us into God’s image, the image of one who gave the most precious material gift of all: God’s son.

In fact, all of this conversation about giving has really been conversation about God, about service to and worship of God. If you are able to read this part of Paul’s letter in the Greek, you note something very odd about this stewardship language. It is all worship and faith language. When he speaks of blessing as material fruit, as money, he uses the word *charis*, which we translate most often as God’s grace. God’s grace lives itself out in us as grace fruit. The word *diakonia*, from which we get the term deacon, which is a term for ministry and service, is in this text used to refer to the offering collected for the poor in Jerusalem. How do we serve God? By ministering to God’s people in need. The word *doxazo*, which expresses our desire and need to glorify God is used here to imply that we glorify God when we assist God’s people. The word *koinonia*, which we most often translate fellowship or community, is used here as contribution. We contribute to community, in other words, when we build up each other by sharing our resources. And finally there is the word *leitourgia*, which means service, and from

which we derive the word liturgy. Ernest Best writes: “In the secular sphere it denoted the service which the wealthy might make to supply the needs of the community. In the Septuagint it was used of the service of the priests in the temple. To give generously and cheerfully to the needs of others is then one way of worshiping God. It produces thanksgiving.” (86-7)

In other words, it’s not about us, not about us who have resources, and not about those to whom we share resources. It’s about God. Best concludes: “We make our appeals on the basis of need, Paul on the basis of what God has done.” That’s a fundamental shift. We look at ourselves. Paul looks at God. We try to get people to give by appealing to their sympathy or their good nature or their sense of morals or their sense of belonging to a community that gives. Paul gets to them look at God and do as God and for the glorifying of God. Isn’t that refreshing? Where our giving is concerned, it’s not all about us. It’s not even mostly about us. It’s about God. I don’t know about you, but that takes a great weight off my caring, want-to-be-giving-as-much-as-I-am-caring shoulders. When I think of sharing the gifts that have been gifted to me, I think not about what I gain or what I lose, I think only of God. I start with God and therefore start down the road with God’s gift of Christ. We share with others because God shared with us. That’s how we become a material Christians. That’s why we celebrate being material Christians. That’s how the material grace of God’s Son, the indescribable gift, makes out of us material grace fruit on God’s tree of communal life.

Like Paul, I like shaking the tree, so that the grace fruit can fall into the hands of people hungry for it.

That, quite simply, is all Paul is saying about the cheerful giving that God loves here in this text. Cheerful giving of oneself and ones resources is the kind of giving that could create community and health and the celebration that goes along with it. That, I believe, is what we come together to study and to celebrate. A community that has been gifted by the inexpressible gift that is the Son of God in our midst. A community that allows that gift to materialize not only in our own lives in this celebration that we enjoy this evening, but also in the way that we share

that gift with others. We are grace fruit on God's tree of communal life. Those who are grace fruit must not celebrate what we have been given, but must cheerfully give that fruit in both spiritual and material ways to those who are in need. We are here so that we can feed the hunger of God's people in need. That is what cheerful giving is all about. No wonder Paul declares that God loves the cheerful giver.

There are all kinds of givers, and no doubt all of them would want to declare that they have God's favor. But, can you imagine how it might sound if some of those kinds of givers tried to lay claim to the declaration that God loves *them* the way God loves a cheerful giver. We know we have such alternative givers even in the church.

Try this one as an example. God loves the "I only get so much allowance giver." My son and daughter perfected this kind of giver at different stages in their lives. Especially when Christmas would roll around. After a certain age, we'd stop giving them money to exchange Christmas gifts with us. I'd say, why don't you use your allowance to buy a gift for your mom and me? And I'd get this look of horror, "what, you mean use *my* money for your gift." And then, after refusing to bow to the logic that if they bought us a gift with our own money then it really wasn't a gift given from them, I got this step up in illogic: "After I spent all my allowance on me, I only had a little bit of money left. If you want a kind of nice gift, you're going to have to give me more allowance." Some would be givers give reasoning to God sometimes, don't they? "God, my material grace is for me. I'll help others with what's left over. If you give me more, then I'll give others more. You come up with a raise and I'll come up with some more material grace."

Maybe God would prefer the "I'm going to make you pay" giver. This is the person who surrenders to pressure of one sort or another and declares: "I'm going to give, but noone is going to be happy about it." Growing up, did you ever see a brother or sister who'd fought hard to take something from a sibling show grace and share some of the spoils that had been won? I remember two of my little cousins, siblings. One of them had amassed all the good toys over to his side of the room. When his mother made him share just one of those toys with his little sister

and he went ballistic. He shared, but everyone at that party paid. This is the giver who declares by his actions “I’m going to whine about how much I had to lose to help somebody else who didn’t even deserve helping because he or she ought to have helped themselves the way I helped myself that no one will ever ask me to help again.” Paul’s point of course is that nobody was strong enough to help themselves into relationship with God. God had to reach out and do it for us. But when some folk get into relationship with others they often want to make the others earn what God gave away to them for free.

Perhaps God likes the quid pro quo giver. This is the person who will give as long as she receives back in equal measure. Paul recognizes that such persons will never be able to celebrate the joy of an indescribable gift. As Ernest Best in his commentary so rightly puts it: “Those who give out of self-interest to receive a reward here or hereafter are reluctant givers, for they act under an inner compulsion to seek their own good. There is no genuine joy, only a cool and calculating self-concern.” (86)

Well, God might enjoy the logical giver. Here is the person who gives only as much as he can afford. Paul’s response to him? The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.

I know, God loves the “I’ll give until it starts to hurt” giver. This giver figures out how much the giving is going to cost, calculates how much she is willing to spend, and then cuts off the giving before she crosses the spending line.

How about, God loves the give something that isn’t really important giver. Here is the person who says nice things to and about people in need and about situations of need, but doesn’t share of his or her resources. To quote Best: “Words of blessing come easily; to bless by sharing our material possessions requires quite another attitude.” (84)

Surely, God loves the “if you make me give, I’ll give” giver. This is the giver who gets caught in the trap of owing somebody something. Or someone has something on him. Little brothers and sisters try to take advantage of this kind of giver when they try to extort stuff from an older sibling. I’m going to tell mom and dad what you did if you don’t give me everything I want. Ministers sometimes resort to that tactic too. When I was growing up we had these

summer revivals. And there were not a few where I remember the message being something like, you're going to hell if you don't give your life to God. Well, who wouldn't give their lives to God under that circumstance. No wonder people were running up the aisles. Wouldn't it be more powerful, though, if people weren't scared into believing, but believed out of conviction of a gift of relationship that they didn't have to do a single thing to earn. Show me a person who gives her life to God in that circumstance, and I'll show you somebody I want walking alongside me in faith in this dangerous and troublesome world in which we live.

So, maybe God loves the "I'll give until I get mad" giver. Surely God loves these givers because there are so many of them. Though they are not all that fruitful, they seem to multiply and multiply, and that multiplication must be a sign of God's good favor right. There are prime examples of this kind of giver in the contemporary church. These are the folk who will leave a denomination, stop giving their presence to the church, or stop giving their resources to a Presbytery, or stop giving anything at all to a local church or a community of people, who give only as long as the people to whom one is giving acts the way we want them to act, or believes the way we want them to believe. This happened with the Corinthians who were often in such tense relationship with Paul that it inhibited their desire to give to this mission effort that was so dear to Paul. As commentators point out, it is highly possible that the Corinthians stopped giving to Paul's collection simply because they were angry with the direction Paul wanted to lead them.

Paul knows that although all these kinds of givers and many more inhabit the church, they are not the kind of giver that God loves. God, he declares, loves the cheerful giver.

But I'll admit it, I'm not always a cheerful giver. For example, I'm not so cheerful sometimes when I have to give time and energy and effort to crafting a sermon. There is so much to do, and so little time to do it in, and then there's a sermon to write. And I often don't know what the impact of a sermon is, so the payoff isn't all that clear. And sometimes the sermons just downright don't work, so there isn't any payoff at all. People don't properly receive what you're working so hard to give. I remember the first time someone fell asleep on one of my sermons. I wanted to throw the pulpit Bible down at him. If I'm going to be a cheerful giver the

least he could do was be a receptive receiver. It's hard to keep your cheer on when the people you're giving to don't receive the right way.

But then, it's not about them, is it? It's about God. We give not to get into someone's good graces. We give to glorify God. The cheerful giver gives expecting nothing in return because she already knows that the people to whom she gives would never be able to give back to her what she has given to them. God gave us the gift of God's Son. We will never be able to pay that back.

Just so, there will be times when we will give to others knowing that there is simply no way they could ever return the gesture to us in kind. But they do give us something. They give back their love. That is a commodity without price and beyond value. And in the end, we don't need anything of value from them anyway, do we, because we have the greatest value there is: the gift of God's son. We give not to get back even love; we give because we are so overjoyed with what has been given to us, that we can't contain ourselves, we can't hold back.

The cheerful giver is the giver who realizes that God has shared with her an indescribable gift. The cheerful giver is the person whose celebration over that indescribable gift is so great that he gives and gives and gives until he actually becomes an indescribable gift in the life of someone else.

Do I have an image of the kind of giving Paul is talking about? I think I do. Let me share a story that will soon go out as my president's letter in the next issue of the seminary magazine *FOCUS*. I write:

"This past June (2009), we were ending what would reasonably be called a very challenging academic year. The seminary, like all seminaries, colleges, and universities, was shaken by the economic quake that disrupted financial landscapes across the globe. Like many other institutional leaders, I prayed throughout the year for God's strength and guidance. I will admit that as the year drew to its close, I offered up a few not so theologically appropriate prayers. I prayed for vacation! And, in my weaker moments, I prayed for a sign—just a little hint that as a community we were walking the path that God had set for us. After a few days

without a celestial fireworks display, some theophany of voice speaking from a whirlwind, or any dream-like epiphany of astonishing proportions, I slung my backpack over my shoulder and walked over to my office like the right-thinking, reasonably-reformed New Testament scholar turned president who knows better than to go around seeking signs that I am—at least most of the time.

“After entering my office, I went through my daily routine. Turned on the computer. Hung up my jacket. Pulled out the work I had accomplished the night before. Sat down in my chair. Turned to face the work on my desk. And saw this note.

“My assistant had placed the note on my desk the day before. While I was out, I had had a visitor. Vismitha Taneti is her name. Vismitha is 5 years old. So, she had not visited by herself. She had come with her dad. And together they had left this note.

“Vismitha’s father is a student at the seminary, as is her mother. On the previous day, she had come with them to one of the conversations I had held with the community. I had alerted the community about some actions we were taking to respond to the financial circumstances we faced. Little children who accompany their parents to such gatherings very often occupy themselves with thoughts or activities that distance them from the adult conversations taking place around them. Vismitha, though, had been listening. Upon arrival back at their seminary apartment, she informed her parents that she wanted to help the seminary. So, she asked them if she could break open her piggy bank. After getting their permission, she did so. She counted out enough change to make a gift of \$52.00. Vismitha’s dad did not want to leave \$52.00 in pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters on my desk, so he wrote the seminary a check. The check accompanied the note on my desk.

“That check was—in my mind at least—a sign of God at work.

“After sitting for almost ten minutes and staring into the space in front of my desk, I composed myself and then I composed a thank you letter to Vismitha. And then I thanked God. For forgiving me for asking for a sign. And, for giving me a sign anyway.” A sign of God’s material grace in the cheerful gift of a little girl.

That is Paul's point to the Corinthians. And to us. **You** can be a sign of God's material grace because YOU are the indescribable gift. You can be! Recognize what you have been given. The gift of Christ. The gift of this wonderful community of faith that is your spiritual family. The gift of each other. Celebrate what **you** have been given by giving some of what you have to God's church and God's people in need. Give to someone else the fruit that has been given to you, the spiritual fruit **and** the material fruit.

Material. Material. **Be** material!!

No one in here has to ask a Christian to be spiritual. Paul knows this about the Corinthians. Not only are they spiritual, they are **too** spiritual. They are so spiritual they are like ghosts, spirits, floating all over the church, all through Corinth, and, they hope, all over heaven, not touching, not doing, not changing anything. The Corinthians are so spiritual you can hardly see them, certainly can't **feel** them. The Corinthians don't like bodily stuff. Bodily stuff is messy, has an odor of decay to it, is limiting, is locked into the world of the flesh. They want to fly around in the clouds of converted, carefree Christianity. Body is ethical and moral and having to help others and do for others and do for God. The Corinthians want to be free of the body so they don't have to worry about right doing and right living and certainly not right sharing. Because, for the Corinthians, spiritual means "I don't care how many resources I do have and I certainly don't care how many resources you **don't** have." Being spiritual means I am content with what I have and I am also content with what you do **not** have.

Can you see why Paul is annoyed? Why he wants these Corinthians to Get Material. He wants them to get messed up in the messiness of other folk's lives. He wants them to give some of what they have to people who have nothing. He wants them to stop floating around talking about heaven and get down in the hellish dirt with people who are being drowned by desperation and despair. He wants them to put some material flesh on those spiritual beliefs and get weighed down into the troubles of the world so they'll want to give of themselves to make some changes in that world. He wants them to Get Material.

I think we Christians today are too much like the Corinthians. We have and we love a spiritual faith. Don't get political; we're spiritual. Don't get material; we're spiritual. Don't get dirty; we're spiritual. We have a spiritual fixation. Like the Corinthians we want to be free of the weight of the world, come into church and leave the world behind and worship God and think about salvation and not be weighed down with all the struggles of life out there. We want to be like . . . beer. Every beer has a commercial these days about being great tasting and less filling. Can't watch a football game without seeing one of those commercials. Coors light. Miller light. Bud light. There's also *Christian* light. Can't go into a church without seeing a whole gaggle of Light Christians. Frothy, sudsy, got good heads on them, always go down smooth. They worship well, they pray well, but there's no weight, no substance to them. Nothing weighing them down. That's because they are not material enough.

Paul's challenge: It's time for all the spiritual people to GET MATERIAL!!!

It's good to be spiritual. But a truly spiritual people is also a material people. A people who not only get salvation, but, having gotten that gift, give that gift of salvation back to some body else. And you give salvation back the way God did, by giving up the high, spiritual life and dropping down into the material world of the incarnation. God got material. So can--so must we. That's Paul's point!

The most spiritual reality of all--God--became material in Jesus and became for us material grace. That's all Paul is asking of the Corinthians. And of us.

It's good to be spiritual. But we are also called to Get Material.

*Spiritual* Christians think about the poor and the starving in the world. *Material* Christians find a way to give food and resources to change their lives.

*Spiritual* Christians lament when they read in the papers about people who have lost everything in floods or hurricanes or tornadoes. *Material* Christians get down on their hands and knees in the mud to rebuild with them.

*Spiritual* Christians give of themselves to mission endeavors in the hot zones of life like urban ministries of food pantries or tutoring services by dropping volunteers off when they go in

and picking volunteers up when they come out. *Material* Christians get out of the car and go into the shelters and closets and classrooms and give their time and talent.

*Spiritual* Christians fret about the church budget and hope the pastor finds a way to get folk to make stronger pledges. *Material* Christians pull out their checkbooks and give to the church before they give to themselves because they have pledged themselves to the causes to which the church has committed itself.

You know what Paul is concerned about. Spiritual Christians are believing, trusting, loving, go-to-church-every-Sunday Christians, but they are light Christians, floating all over God's creation not touching much except the pew they park on. Material Christians are weighed down with the issues of God's world and God's people and they give their time, their talents, their love, and, yes, their money to position the church to power the changes that can transform both soul and body.

Be material. Do material Grace. That is what stewardship is all about. Stewardship is about moving from *saying* grace to *doing* grace. It's about celebrating the spiritual by getting material.

That is how you not only celebrate having the indescribable gift of Christ; it is how you become an indescribable gift for others.

The indescribable gift? It's you. It's us. *This* community is a tree of life for God's world and each of you is material grace fruit on that tree and you ripen in here in community and you drop off in here with your tithes, your offerings, your time, and your talents; you drop off out there into the world with your gifts of time and talent and, yes, your money to share the indescribable gift of God's life and your own lives to those who need what you have, all that you have to give.

We are material grace fruit. Feed God's people.