

## ***Guidance for our Giving: Wisdom from the Church's First Special Offering***

Financial challenges confronting us individually, in our congregations, the District and Synod, and our nation are real. I can think of no better advice for us than the wisdom Paul used to encourage the Corinthians to help the poor saints in Jerusalem, as we seek to fund the mission God has given us.

Rather than just read this column by itself, I urge you to take your Bible and see in II Corinthians 8 and 9 the original basis for the advice I am seeking to summarize.

1. The Macedonians did not let their “extreme poverty” keep them from “overflowing in a wealth of generosity.” (8:2) This generosity exemplifies the grace of God at work. (8:1)
2. The Macedonian model includes their voluntary participation. They were not forced to give. They wanted to give. I cannot help but believe that their eagerness was triggered by knowing that what they had came from God, and it was their privilege to contribute. (8:3,4) Note also Titus’ eagerness to help in 8:16f, and Paul’s advice in 9:7, “not reluctantly or under compulsion.”
3. Giving oneself to God first frees one to care for others. (8:5) We know he will provide for us, so we can provide for others. The way we show our love for God is to show it for other people.
4. “According to one’s means” (8:3,11,12) is a key guideline for our giving. Our giving depends on God’s prior giving. (“What do you have that you did not receive?” [I Cor. 4:7] applies to more than Biblical knowledge.) Our gifts should reflect God’s giving to us. Our job is not to calculate our giving on the basis of what someone is doing, or a fair share. Rather, our giving is to be in proportion to God’s gifts.
5. When Paul sends Titus to Corinth to help them do their part in the offering for the Jerusalem saints, he signals that we should welcome the messengers God sends our way to help us with our response. We are part of God’s people, not above encouragement and instruction. (8:6) Let’s not resist our pastors and leaders when they urge us to do our part in the Lord’s work. Instead, let us make their work a joy by responding positively. (See 8:16-24.)

6. Titus' responsibility is to help the Corinthians complete (fulfill) their intentions. (8:6,10,11) Let us follow through on our commitments too.
7. Our giving is a place for excellence, not mediocrity or just giving a token amount so we can say that we participated. God's grace is excellent! Let our response be the same—our best! (8:7)
8. Paul shares the example of the Macedonians not to command the Corinthians to give, but to urge them to test the genuineness of their love by comparing themselves with others. May the example we choose to test the sincerity of our love not be someone who is stingy!
9. More than the example of others, let Jesus' generosity inspire us. He left the halls of heaven's wealth to become poor, that we might be truly wealthy, to become heirs of heaven by his grace. (8:9) Can anything be more compelling for our giving?
10. Paul urges the Corinthians to see their place in the larger picture and places before them the principle of sharing. He is not trying to pressure them, but cause them to see that their abundance at the present time can alleviate the needs of those who are hurting, (8:13-15) adducing the example of manna from the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. (Exodus 16:18) This applies to us today, when we may be frustrated when some people are in a bind because they have over-reached in the purchase of homes, cars, and vacations; they can get help when we who have been prudent in our financial management may end up paying for it. How can we avoid a self-righteous attitude and be opened to share? Might the grace of God set us free?
11. Paul makes arrangements for the gifts to be handled with integrity, so there may be no accusations of the money being mishandled. (8:18-21) The money will be taken to Jerusalem by more than one person, and by those who are trusted. We too need to handle church finances properly, so that people may not be tempted to steal them, and that members and the public have complete confidence that they are being used rightly. Offerings should be counted in the presence of at least two people; there should be a segregation of duties between receiving income and disbursing it, that no suspicions may be raised. Following government regulations goes without saying. The church's life, work, and reputation is too precious not to take these precautions.
12. In II Corinthians 9:1-5, Paul approaches the Corinthians very personally. He does not

want to be humiliated by a lack of response. He has bragged to others about their zeal for the offering. To help them keep their promises and keep himself from being embarrassed by a poor showing on their part, he sends Titus and his co-workers to assist them. In so doing, he wants their gift to be bountiful and voluntary. Similarly, let us help one another to participate, so no one is humiliated and others are not disappointed.

13. Giving is a very personal matter, even as it has corporate dimensions. We should think about it. We should engage our mind in deciding how to respond, as we make our commitments. In 9:5, Paul speaks of the “gift they had promised,” and in 9:7, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind.”
14. A principle is at work in our giving, The more one gives, the more can be done. “The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (9:6)
15. God gives us plenty of promises to inspire and encourage us in our giving. (See 9:9b-11.) “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share in every good work.”
16. Our offerings work. They serve to supply the needs of people, to support the work of the church, and to give thanks to God. (9:11-12)
17. Our offerings are a way of testing whether we truly trust God to provide, whether we believe the Gospel and so glorify God. (9:13-15) They are a way of expressing our faith in God and so glorifying him for his indescribable grace in Jesus Christ.

The challenges in our current economy are real, but I am confident that if we let the divine wisdom God first shared with the Corinthians through Paul—if we let that wisdom guide us—we can still enjoy our stewardship and accomplish the work God has given us. By God’s grace, let us continue to be the cheerful givers God loves. (9:7)

Rev. Dr. Gerhard C. Michael, Jr.  
President, Florida-Georgia District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.