

CHAPTER NINE

To Encourage a Rich Harvest

BACKGROUND: Paul ended Chapter Eight by urging the Corinthians to give their offering for the Christians in Jerusalem, who were in desperate need, as a demonstration of their love for Christ. He goes on to inform them of the blessings of almsgiving.

9:1-2. *Now concerning the ministering to the saints, it is superfluous for me to write to you; for I know your willingness, about which I boast of you to the Macedonians, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal has stirred up the majority.* Notice Paul's wisdom. In 2 Cor 8:1-5, he used the example of the generosity of the Christians in Macedonia, who gave willingly though they themselves were in great need, in order to encourage the Corinthians to imitate this good example. Here he confides that to encourage the generosity of the Macedonians, he had likewise boasted to them about the zeal of the Corinthian Christians.

9:3-5. *Yet I have sent the brethren, lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this respect, that, as I said, you may be ready; lest if some Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we (not to mention you!) should be ashamed of this confident boasting. Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time, and prepare your bountiful gift beforehand, which you had previously promised, that it may be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation.* Paul is sending Titus and two other fellow-workers ahead to be sure the Corinthians understand why their almsgiving is necessary, for themselves as well as for those in need, and that what they have promised will be ready. If he brings someone from the church in Macedonia with him, he does not want his boasting about them to seem unfounded and thereby bring embarrassment to all concerned.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). By what methods did Paul encourage spiritual growth in those he taught? Which of these is most effective?

9:6. *But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.* To give so God's work may be done and His people cared for is to plant seeds of faith, hope, love, courage and joy. The more seeds we plant, the more of a harvest we can expect (Gal 6:7-9).

Do you not know that we live in a foreign land, as though strangers and travelers? Do you not know that it is the lot of travelers to be ejected when they think not, expect not, which is also our lot. For this reason then, whatever we have acquired, we leave here. For the Lord does not allow us to take anything with us. If we have built houses, if we have bought fields, if any other such thing, not only does He not allow us to take them and depart, but does not even credit us with the price of them...

The just, although having nothing, will both dwell here amidst all men's possessions as though they were his own; and also, when he has departed to Heaven, shall see those his eternal habitations. And he shall both here suffer no discomfort...and when he has been restored to his own country, shall receive the true riches. In order that we may gain both the things of this life and of that, let us use rightly the things we have. For so shall we be citizens of the heavens.

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9:7. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. Christ gave the ultimate, His life, willingly. Though few are called upon to literally follow in His footsteps all the way to the cross, those who call themselves Christians must strive to be like Him in all ways, including giving, so that His work may continue. Those who have means should give joyfully to help those who do not (read Deut 15:7-11).

Make a little chest for the poor at home, near the place where you stand praying. As often as you pray, first deposit your alms, and then send up your prayer. As you would not wish to pray with unwashed hands, neither do so without alms...If you have this little coffer you have a defense against the Devil, you give wings to your prayer, you make your house holy, having meat for the King (Mt 25:34-36).

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9:8. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, have an abundance for every good work. As God provided seed to all living matter of His creation so that propagation is assured, He provides the means whereby His people are able to do that which He asks of them. If we plant a seed and nurture it, it will produce a harvest of its kind and a multiplicity of new seeds to continue the ever-expanding cycle. So too, if we manage to give of ourselves and our treasures without expecting any type of recognition or reward on earth, God will bless our efforts. Through His grace, all our *reasonable* needs will be met and we will have an abundance from which to help others. No one can "out give" God.

I am not leading you to entire poverty, but for the present I require you to cut off superfluities and to desire a "sufficiency" alone...That is superfluous which is more than we need. When we are able to live healthfully and respectably without a certain thing, then certainly that thing is superfluous.

Thus let us think also in regard of clothing and of food and of a dwelling and of all our other wants, and in everything inquire what is necessary. For what is superfluous is also useless. When you have practiced living on what is sufficient, then if you have a mind to emulate that widow (Lk 21:2), we will lead you on to greater things than these. For you have not yet attained to the philosophy of that woman while you are anxious about what is sufficient. For she soared higher even than this; for what was to have been her support, that she cast in, all of it.

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). What spiritual wisdom can we glean from Chrysostom's words regarding superfluous "things"?

9:9. As it is written: "He has dispersed abroad, He has given to the poor; His righteousness remains forever." Quoting Ps 112:9, Paul reflects that when we give as a consequence of love and faith, God remembers. In the measure we give, so we receive, in this life and the next, because almsgiving is an indication of a purified heart and soul.

The merciful man is not arrayed in a vest reaching to the feet, nor does he carry about bells nor wear a crown; but he is wrapped in the robe of loving kindness...holier than the sacred vestment and is anointed with oil, not composed of material elements but produced by the Spirit. He bears a crown of mercies, for it is said, *Who crowns you with loving-kindness and tender mercies* (Ps 103:4). Instead of wearing a plate bearing the Name of God, He is himself like God.

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). Is there spiritual value in giving from ill-gotten gains? (Read 1 Sam 15:22-23).

9:10-14. *Now may He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything for all liberality, which causes thanksgiving through us to God. For the administration of this service not only supplies the needs of the saints but also is abounding through many thanksgivings to God, while through the proof of this ministry they glorify God for the obedience of your confession to the Gospel of Christ and for your liberal sharing with them and all men, and by their prayer for you, who long for you because of the exceeding grace of God in you.* When those in need are ministered to by God's people, the harvest is great. Those who receive assistance are grateful that their suffering is relieved because of God's word to His people; the ministry of the teacher is shown to be effective; and the good example of those who give generously encourages love, fellowship, prayer and spiritual growth among those looking on. All this comes together through the grace of God. Nothing good can be accomplished without grace, but grace is actuated only when man cooperates with God's will.

When you see a poor believer, think that you behold an altar...you honor the altar in the church because it receives Christ's Body; but he who is himself the Body of Christ, you treat with rudeness and neglect...When you see such a beggar you must not only refrain from insulting him, but even reverence him, and if you see another insulting him, prevent it, repel it...Do you want to see the altar built by God Himself?...The priest enters into the holy of holies. Into yet more awesome places you may enter when you offer this sacrifice, where none is present but *your Father Who sees in secret* (Mt 6:4)...What is the smoke, what the sweet savor of this altar? Praise and thanksgiving. And how far does it ascend? As far as unto Heaven? By no means—it passes beyond Heaven itself—and the Heaven of Heaven, and arrives at the throne of the King. For He says *your prayers and your alms have come up before God* (Acts 10:4).

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9:15. *Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!* The gift which words cannot describe is God's divine plan for the salvation of mankind through His Son. An important part of this plan is the method by which the physical and spiritual needs of all are met through love and sharing. He who lives the Christ-like life that is called for under this plan has access to God's grace and is blessed with all good things: the glorious riches of the Kingdom which begin in this life and extend into eternity.

God's riches are strong faith, firm hope, ardent love and good works.⁶

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). **By what methods did Paul encourage spiritual growth in those he taught? Which of these methods is most effective?** Paul fostered spiritual growth in those he taught by encouraging them (2 Cor 7:4, 7, 11,14-16; 8:7), by pointing to the good examples of others (2 Cor 8:1-5), by reminding them of Christ's teachings and example (2 Cor 8:9), and by praying for them (2 Cor 13:9).

Christ's teachings engender knowledge of and thus love for Him. For the maturing Christian, they are, therefore, powerful tools towards spiritual growth. For someone just beginning to learn about

Christ, however, encouragement and good examples are probably most effective. A hardened heart is not receptive to the seeds of faith. Man learns to love only after he receives love. The sower who first softens the heart encourages a greater harvest. Prayer is a powerful tool in any circumstance.

(b). What spiritual wisdom can we glean from Chrysostom's words regarding superfluous "things"? They remind us of the principle of keeping our desires in bounds, restrained by the needs of others. To be concerned only with ourselves causes withdrawal and isolation and separates us from the rest of the Body of Christ. If we realize that we do not need the biggest, the best, or the most of everything, we will always have a surplus from which to help others and to give to God's work. If we do not grow in this direction, we will never find the occasion to give because there is always something more to gather for ourselves.

Possessions are external things, but our desires are within us. It is quite useless to try to reform the external objects if we have not first resolved the internal motivation. We may give all our money away, but what use is that if the longing for it still burns inside us? Poor people can covet. Poor people can envy. And poor people can misuse the little money they have. Getting rid of our material possessions will do nothing, in itself, to create in us a right attitude towards them.

The real test always lies in our attitudes. We can enjoy our possessions, seeing them as God's generous gifts, and using them as much for others as for ourselves. We can possess them without allowing them to possess us.

Only then can we be quite sure that if, in God's will, we are ever deprived of them, we may accept their loss as contentedly as we did their superabundance.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA⁷

(c). Is there spiritual value in giving from ill-gotten gains? (Read 1 Sam 15:22.) To relieve another's distress from ill-gotten gains is to give a mixed message—the end does not justify the means.

Nothing equals the merit of almsgiving. Great is the power of this action when it flows from untarnished sources, but when it comes from sources that are defiled, it is as if a fountain were to send forth mud. When alms are given from our just gains, it is as if they flowed forth from a pure and limpid stream, one flowing from paradise, pleasant to the eye, pleasant to the touch, something cool and light given in the noonday heat. Such are alms. Beside this fountain grow, not poplars nor pines nor cypresses but trees more rare and precious: the love of God, the praise of men, glory before God, the good will of all, the wiping away of sins, great confidence in God, and small esteem for riches.

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We cannot bribe God or appease Him with token gifts. Almsgiving is a part of the Christ-like life, not a substitute for it.

¹ Schaff, "Homily XVI," p.359.

² *ibid*, "Homily XLIII on First Corinthians," p.262.

³ *ibid*, "Homily XIX on Second Corinthians," Vol. XII, p.370.

⁴ *ibid*, "Homily XX," p.374.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Velimirovic, Part One, p.23.

⁷ Winter, "Deal with the Cause First," (Day 31).

⁸ Toal, "The Fountain of Alms," Vol. Three, p.311.