

THE GRACE OF GIVING

– AUGUST 13. – 2 CORINTHIANS 9. –

GIVING TO THE POOR – LENDING TO THE LORD – THE SECRET OF ISRAEL'S BLINDNESS TO THE GOSPEL – THE BETTER CLASSES OF THE GENTILES ATTRACTED BY THE TRUTH – SYSTEMATIC ALMSGIVING BETTER THAN SPASMODIC CHARITY – GENEROSITY INCULCATES BREADTH OF MIND AND HEART – DEGREE OF PROSPERITY SHOULD BE MEASURE OF OUR CHARITY.

"In all things I gave you an example, that so laboring ye ought to help the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive."

– Acts 20:35. R.V.

CHRISTIAN benevolence – almsgiving – is the lesson inculcated in today's Study. The general disposition of the fallen nature is to give adherence or support to the strong and to expect weaker ones to rally around and uphold us. This is self-pleasing – the way of the fallen nature. But the method of the New Creature in Christ is to be the reverse of this. He is to be on the lookout for the welfare, the interests and the comforts of others, especially of those in his own family and of the weaker members of the Household of Faith. The stronger of the brethren in Christ should take pleasure in helping the weaker and the less able, and so far as possible in bringing all up to the stature of manhood in Christ.

Our Study is addressed to the Corinthian Church, and is on behalf of the Christians in and about Jerusalem. Naturally the question arises, "Why should collections have been then for the Christians in Jerusalem any more than for the Christians at Corinth? There were three reasons why this should be done: (1) A severe famine had prevailed in the vicinity of Jerusalem; (2) Jerusalem was

not a commercial city, and therefore money was less plentiful there; (3) Apparently those in and about Jerusalem who received the Gospel were chiefly the poor.

Moreover, from the open persecution of the Truth there we can readily judge that there was also a great deal of quiet opposition to all who sympathized with the Gospel of Christ. As small shop people, they were probably boycotted; and as laborers, they were probably rejected as far as possible, except as necessity might demand their services. On the contrary, the cities of Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia were prosperous; and as far as we may judge, the class which accepted the Gospel was in many cases the better element. For instance, we recall the conversion of Sergius Paulus, the deputy governor at [R5926 : page 218] Paphos; that of Dionysius, one of the professors in the University of Athens; that of Damaris, of the same city; that of Justus, of Corinth, and of Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue of that city.

BLINDED BY RELIGIOUS PRIDE

The question naturally arises, Why should the same Gospel attract the well-to-do classes in Asia Minor and Greece and repel the majority outside the poor class in Judea? The answer would seem to be that amongst the Jews, who had been long acquainted with the true God and His gracious promises of Messiah, a religious pride had developed, especially amongst the wealthy and the learned. Moreover, because their religious system was in advance of every other religious system in the world, the learned attributed a like superiority to themselves individually. They "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others." – Luke 18:9.

This was the secret of Israel's blindness to the Gospel. The religious leaders and theologians were so self-conscious, and relied so implicitly upon their interpretations of the Divine promises as centering in themselves, that they could not regard the humble Nazarene and His unlearned followers except as impostors. Later,

when the Gospel began to be preached to the Gentiles, the opposition of the Jewish theologians was increased; for it was utterly contrary to every thought of their religious pride that God would accept either the humble Jews or the Gentiles to His favor, and reject themselves, the leading representatives of His Cause and work. – John 7:43-53.

Amongst the Gentiles, however, the case was very different. While the illiterate masses were firmly bound by the superstition of their various religions, those who were of an honest mind amongst the better educated were quick to discern that many features of their own religion were merely superstitions. Probably they had been somewhat attracted to the Jewish religion as being much more reasonable than their own; for we find that the Gentiles readily resorted to the Jewish synagogues. But the Jewish religion would necessarily be unsatisfactory to them, since it would appear to be very narrow, limiting the Divine blessings in a special manner to Israelites only – a people whom the Greeks considered rather inferiors in the arts of that time. But the Gospel, throwing wide open the door to those who desired righteousness – of every nation, people, kindred and tongue – would naturally commend itself to the class whom we are describing as being the most reasonable explanation of the Jewish doctrines and their grand eventual outcome, the meaning of which had long been hidden.

THE BENEFITS OF SYSTEMATIC CHARITY

At all events, the saints at Jerusalem were poorer than were the saints at Corinth. Therefore it was appropriate that the Apostle should suggest to the latter the propriety of sending a gift to the former. Living at a time when the conveniences for transferring money were very inferior to the very poorest known today, the various congregations could send their gifts only at the hand of the Apostle when he should go to Jerusalem the following year.

St. Paul's words intimate that the suggestion which he had made to the Corinthian brethren nearly a year before had been well received, and the collections zealously entered upon. For this reason it was superfluous for him to write in this connection any of the particulars respecting the necessity for this collection. But he hints to them that there was a bare possibility that the work zealously begun a year before might not have been patiently carried out; and that after he had boasted somewhat to others of their love and zeal for the Lord, he would regret, when he came to them en route to Jerusalem, if it should be found that, after all, they had failed to have their donation ready.

In his previous letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle had suggested methodical charity, saying, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given instructions to the Churches in Galatia, even so do ye. On the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God has prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come." – 1 Corinthians 16:1,2.

It was the Apostle's experience, as it is the experience of all thoughtful people, that systematic charity is better than spasmodic giving. Not only is the result generally larger, but the influence upon the giver is more beneficial; for it keeps before the mind an object, a service to be rendered as unto the Lord. With many, almost the only opportunity for serving the Lord's Cause is that of contributing money. Of course, where a consecrated child of God can do so, it is far better that he should give to the saints after the manner of St. Paul and his traveling associates – giving spiritual gifts and blessings, either by public preaching or by house-to-house visiting – presenting the Truth either by the printed page or by tongue or both.

But there are those so circumstanced in life through **[R5927 : page 218]** lack of talent or of strength or of opportunity – hindered by prior mortgages upon their time in the way of family obligations

– that practically their only chance for serving the Lord and manifesting their love for Him is through their gifts to His Cause and to His people. For such to be deprived of the opportunity of exercising themselves in the Lord's service in this manner, either through lack of a case needing their assistance or through lack of instruction respecting this method of Divine service, would be to deprive them of an important opportunity of service, and correspondingly to deprive them of the blessings which follow every service rendered to the Lord.

LIBERALITY AN INDEX OF LOVE

We notice, therefore, that the Apostle felt very free to recommend to the Church the grace of giving and even to press upon them the fact that their liberality, in proportion to their ability, would in a large degree be an index of their love for the Lord and for the Gospel. But here we note, in contrast, the fact that the Apostle did not ask alms of these believers when first they received the Lord's grace, lest they should in any degree get the impression that the Gospel was being preached from mercenary motives – for filthy lucre's sake. Accordingly we find that rather than mention money the Apostle preached to these very same Corinthians for more than a year without even a suggestion as to remuneration; that rather than be chargeable to any, he labored with his own hands at his trade of tent-making. – 2 Corinthians 11:7-9.

Let us also note the change which the full appreciation of the Gospel wrought upon the believers at Corinth. At first they were so negligent of their privilege that seemingly they never even thought of volunteering financial assistance to the Apostle while he was serving them by the labor of his own hands and receiving some assistance from believers in other places. But after the grace of God had entered more fully into their hearts, they began to appreciate the value of the Truth which they had received and to realize that it had brought them priceless blessings of hope, joy, faith and character.

Then they had a zeal, a "forwardness," to do something financially in the Lord's service.

And now that the Apostle was absent from them, and [R5927 : page 219] after his course had proved to them that he sought not their money but themselves, to do them good, he felt free to draw their attention to the great blessing which would result from liberality in the Lord's Cause in proportion to their ability and love. To impress this matter, he gave them a parable, saying, "He that soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he that soweth bountifully shall reap bountifully." This reminds us of the proverb, "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is proper, but it tendeth to poverty. The liberal soul shall be made fat; and he that watereth shall be watered also himself." (Proverbs 11:24,25.) The evident lesson is that the Lord is pleased to see His people cultivate breadth of heart as well as of mind – generosity in proportion to their knowledge of Him and of His generosity.

OUR LORD'S ESTIMATE OF OUR GIFTS

The Scriptures nowhere declare that cases of absolute privation amongst the Lord's people are proofs that at some time in their past life, when possessed of means, they failed to use a portion of it in charity, in the Lord's service. But the inspired words above quoted come very close to giving this lesson. At all events, it is profitable that we lay this testimony to heart and that every child of God henceforth shall be earnestly careful that out of the blessings of the Lord coming to us day by day some measure be carefully, prayerfully and lovingly laid aside as seed to be sown in the Lord's service according to the best wisdom and judgment which He will give us.

How many have such carefulness for themselves, either in using every penny as fast as it comes or in being so interested in laying by for the outworking of future plans, that they feel that they

can spare nothing for charity! How many such can afterward see that they made a great mistake in so doing! When their accumulations suddenly vanish, either through sickness or through accident or bank failure or otherwise, then they have good reason to regret that they sowed no "seed" after the manner described by the Apostle in Verse 6 of today's Study.

Our Lord showed us how He measures our gifts – that He esteems them not according to the amount given, but chiefly according to the spirit which prompts the gift – when He drew attention to the poor widow who cast two mites into the Temple treasury. (Luke 21:1-4.) From the standpoint of His estimation, that poor widow had cast in a larger sum than had any of the wealthy who had given merely out of their abundance, and not to such an extent that they felt it. How many of the Lord's people would be more "fat" spiritually today, if they would give attention to the exercise of this talent, this opportunity for service, we cannot say. The Lord alone knows. But today's Study makes it incumbent upon us to point out a privilege in this direction which is within the reach of the very poorest of the Lord's people.

A THANK-OFFERING TO THE LORD

Seldom is it necessary to caution people against over-much giving. Yet in some instances such caution is proper; and in some instances in Scripture giving has been restrained. No one should give to the extent of causing privation to those dependent upon him. Nor should any one give to such extent as to bring upon himself financial bankruptcy and cause losses to others. The Apostolic rule for giving we have already quoted. The "laying by on the first day of the week" should be general – "according as the Lord hath prospered him." The degree of our prosperity should be the measure of our charity. Upon this, as upon every subject, the Scriptures inculcate the spirit of a sound mind.

"The Lord loveth a cheerful giver." Gifts bestowed in any other than a cheerful spirit might just as well not be given; for they will bring no blessing. The Lord does not appreciate such giving. In His estimation it has no "sweet odor." To be appreciated of the Lord, the gift must be a thank-offering, prompted by a realization of our debt of everlasting gratitude to Him from whom cometh every good and every perfect gift. And to such, the Apostle assures us, "God is able to make all grace abound." Whoever gives anything in the Divine service – time, talent, strength, money or influence – will find himself proportionately abounding in the different graces; for such are in the right attitude of heart to grow in grace.

The Apostle seems to imply that such will have "sufficiency in all things," as well as be able to "abound in every good work." Sufficiency may not mean luxury and every comfort; but "all sufficiency" is gained always where there is "godliness with contentment." In proof that he is inculcating no new theory respecting the Divine care over those who are seeking to scatter to others a portion of the blessings that come to them, whether temporal or spiritual, the Apostle quotes from Psalm 112:9.

In Verse 11, the Apostle speaks of "being enriched in everything." We are not to understand him to mean that all of the Lord's people will be enriched financially. St. Paul himself was an example of the fact that the Lord's people do not become wealthy. He is speaking of the enrichment of the heart. In another place he speaks of himself and his colaborers in the Gospel work, "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." (2 Corinthians 6:10.) These faithful servants of God made many rich in hope, rich in faith, rich in love and in all the various concomitant graces which these qualities imply.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the grandest Example of self-denial in the interests of others. He was rich in the possession of the spiritual nature with all its glory and honor. Yet for our sakes He became

poor, taking the human nature in order that He might redeem mankind. To this end He surrendered life itself at Calvary, that through His sacrifice we might become rich – possessed of Divine favor and the riches of Divine grace in Christ – even joint-heirship with Him who now is our exalted Lord at the right hand of Divine Majesty. But to attain this joint-heirship with Him, we must study to be like Him, to have His Spirit and to share with others whatever He may give us of either temporal or spiritual favors – either to feed or to clothe others (particularly those of the Household of Faith) temporally or spiritually, as circumstances may dictate.

"Thanks be to God for His unspeakable Gift!" That Gift is our Savior, our Redeemer. (John 3:16.) In this connection it is impossible for us to tell the riches of Divine grace toward us – the numberless blessings and mercies which are ours through our Lord. He represents to us the very fulness of every Divine provision for our eternal welfare. As the Apostle elsewhere says, "In Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Deity bodily." (Colossians 2:9.) As yet, only the Church can now give thanks to God for His unspeakable Gift. But by and by the whole world of mankind will be in a condition to recognize that Gift and to render thanks. When, at the close of the Messianic Reign for the restoration of the Adamic race to their original perfection, all wilful sinners shall have been destroyed, then "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, to the glory of God." Then every creature in Heaven, on earth and in the sea shall be heard saying, "Praise, glory, honor, dominion and might be unto Him that sitteth upon the Throne, and to the Lamb, forever!" for the Unspeakable Gift.

