

### **Excel in This Grace of Giving**

At what do you excel? Some of you might say, "I think I do okay at some things but I wouldn't say I 'excel' at any of them." Well, whom do you know that excels at something then? As you think about it, why is it that they are so good at what they do? What's their secret?

In 1997 Gary McPherson studied 157 randomly selected children as they picked out and learned a musical instrument. Some went on to become fine musicians and some faltered. McPherson searched for the traits that separated those who progressed from those who did not. What traits do you suppose made the difference? IQ? Nope, not a good predictor. Aural sensitivity, sense of rhythm, perfect pitch? No, as many with natural rhythm eventually quit as continued. The best single predictor was how the children answered a single question that McPherson asked each student before they even chose their instrument. It was the question, "How long do you think you will play?" The students who shrugged their shoulders did not become very proficient. The ones who said they only planned on playing for a few years had modest success. But the few children who said, in effect: "I want to be a musician! I'm going to play my whole life." – those children soared; they excelled.<sup>1</sup> Commitment was the key to success.

Throughout the Bible, we are encouraged to grow spiritually – to grow all our lives long! For example, Peter says...

**...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ... (II Peter 3:18)**

And the apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians that the various kinds of spiritual gifts, like teaching or preaching or caring, are given by the Holy Spirit...

**...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Eph. 4:12, 13)**

And this growth is not something that happens automatically, without any effort or discipline on our part. No, instead, with the Holy Spirit as our Guide and discipline being added on our part, anyone will grow spiritually. This is what the apostle Paul is talking about when he describes the battle between our "flesh," our sinful desires, and the Spirit. Listen:

**But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another... Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. [How do we 'crucify the flesh'? Next verse...]**

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16, 17a, 24, 25 NASB)**

This is all a necessary prelude to our topic of study today. The apostle Paul, in Second Corinthians, singles out one discipline, giving, and he urges the Corinthians to "EXCEL" at it. Is this something we're supposed to do today and, if so, why? The answer is "yes," and...

#### **I. Here's the Answer to "Why?"**

We should excel at giving because our growth or maturity in other spiritual areas is linked to our growth in the area of giving. Look at II Cor. 8:7 again:

**...just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.**

All forms of grace are meant to be connected. Last week, we heard James stating this truth another way. He said:

**What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)**

The grace of giving is linked to all other forms of spiritual maturity. You can't be mature in faith if you aren't also mature as a giver.

So, the next question is logically this: “How do I become mature as a giver?” The Bible has much to say in answer to that question. We need to understand...

## **II. The Bible's Three Levels of the Grace of Giving.**

Yes, the Bible describes at least three levels or stages of this “grace of giving.” The first is **Obligated Giving**. This is what we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are obliged to give. An obligation is something that is required, as if by law. The Old Testament law is pretty clear that God-followers are obliged to give one-tenth of their harvest, their income, to God. (Lev. 27:30, 32)

**“A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD: it is holy to the LORD... The entire tithe of the herd and flock – every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod – will be holy to the LORD.”**

Now, while a “tithe” literally means 10%, the Old Testament Israelites actually were required to give three “tithes,” which together amounted to 23% of their yearly income. But some believers today argue that this Old Testament tithe is no longer in force because Paul says that we are, “...*not under law, but under grace.*” (Rom. 6:14) Have you heard people say that? Somehow, those same people seem to ignore the same apostle's words when he said:

**Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. (2 Cor. 9:6)**

Randy Alcorn, in his book, *Managing God's Money*, writes:

Those who say that, “Tithing isn't for today,” need to examine their hearts. Are they actually demeaning the transforming power of grace and advocating spiritual-sounding “grace giving” as a license to cling to material wealth? New Testament Christians model lives transformed by the radical grace of Christ – making them *more* sacrificial and generous, not less!

I view tithing as a child's first steps – *not* the best she'll ever do, but simply a good beginning, one which her parents celebrate. Tithing is like the training wheels on the bicycle of giving.<sup>2</sup>

Alcorn notes that 40% of professing Christians give nada, zero, nothing each year. Those who give nothing usually give as their reason that they just can't afford it. But God says:

**“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” (Malachi 3:10)**

So, actually, non-tithers have it exactly backwards. It's not that they don't have enough to tithe, it's that they don't have enough because they DON'T tithe! As His Followers, we're obliged to tithe.

The second level of the grace of giving is Voluntary Giving. Now, you might be thinking, "Wait! There's something beyond tithing?" Yeah, there is and it's completely voluntary. But if you have a negative attitude about this, you're kind of like the person who says they want to get in shape and after running one lap around the track, you find out you have 10 more to go if you want to get in shape and so you stop. You see, do you want to grow spiritually or not?

Again, the Old Testament pattern of giving in the Temple defines things for us. Worship in the Temple included the giving of tithes (obligatory) and offerings (voluntary). The animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were technically offerings. There were seven in all and six of these offerings involved sacrificing an animal. These were all considered voluntary because there was no designated time for them. The first three were designated for the atonement of various sins and the fourth was a cereal offering that accompanied these sin offerings.

But the last three offerings were completely voluntary and had nothing to do with sin. They were known as "Peace" offerings. One marked the completion of a vow, some promise made to God that had been fulfilled. But the last two, ahhh, the last two! One acknowledged "unexpected blessings." And the last one was called a "freewill offering." It was just to say, "Father God, You're the best! I love you so."

Do you see how all of these Old Testament, voluntary offerings are connected to Christ and how we can practice them today? We celebrate all the sin-offerings when we celebrate communion. Christ is our sacrificial lamb, so the animal sacrifice has been made. But the last three can be practiced through a life of voluntary giving! Giving to acknowledge His "unexpected blessings" and just to say, "Father God, I love you so." Now, what might this look like in a twenty-first century life?

When David Green was 29-years-old, he was married with two young boys and was working as a store manager in a five-and-dime store in Oklahoma City called TG&Y. He borrowed \$600 to buy equipment to manufacture miniature picture frames. He paid his boys seven cents a frame to help put them together on the family kitchen table. A year later, he opened a 300-square-foot space in town to sell his stuff. Three years after that, he quit his job at TG&Y and opened a 6,000-square-foot space to sell expanded arts and crafts merchandise. Green continued adding store after store after store, until today his Hobby Lobby empire sells \$3 billion worth of arts and crafts merchandise every year. And it's still expanding, hoping to add 35 more stores annually.

But here's what's unique – Hobby Lobby is run as a Christian business. What does that mean? It means that Hobby Lobby is closed on Sundays. It means that they practice profit sharing with their employees. They've raised the minimum wage in their stores a dollar a year since 2009. And the Green Family practices both tithing and voluntary giving. David Green says: We've always tithed. That's something that we always have been taught, but we've also been taught that that's not giving. Giving is above what we owe God, and [what we owe God] is our tithes.<sup>3</sup>

In what ways has David Green practiced voluntary giving? He's spent well over 400 million donating properties to over 50 churches. He gave a 10-million-dollar manufacturing

plant to Liberty University in 2004 for their campus to expand. He gave a 70-million-dollar gift to Oral Roberts University.

But evangelism is Green's greatest passion. He's footing the bill to see that every nonbeliever on Planet Earth receives a Bible in their language in his lifetime – and he's 73! He's working through *Every Home for Christ*, which sends evangelists door-to-door in the poorest countries on earth. They've already distributed 1.4 billion Bibles in 140 countries.

And for wealthier nations, it's Hobby Lobby dollars that provided the YouVersion Bible App for mobile phones, available in 300 different languages. That app has been downloaded more than 50 million times.

David Green could afford a fleet of private jets but, when he travels, he flies coach. In his will, 90% of the company will go to ministry causes, only 10% to his family. Why is he living like this? Green knows that Hobby Lobby won't last forever. He says:

Woolworth's is gone. Sears is almost gone... So what? This is worth billions... So what? Is that the end of life, making more money and building something? For me, I want to know that I have affected people for eternity. I believe once someone knows Christ as their personal Savior, I've affected eternity. I matter 10 billion years from now. I matter. Someone that does all this (pointing to his headquarters) doesn't matter. I'm sorry, it's gone.

Does your life matter? Voluntary Giving is a step up in spiritual maturity. It's giving above and beyond the tithe because of your love and thankfulness to God. It's giving so that more people can be saved for eternity. Giving so that people can eat or have shoes or get a job are good things. But giving so that people can eat, have shoes, get a job AND hear about Jesus – THAT will impact eternity! What do you want your freewill dollars to do?

But there's one more step of growth in the grace of giving. It's called Sacrificial Giving. Sacrificial giving is giving beyond your ability. It pushes you past the point where the numbers add up. It's giving that causes us to do with less, maybe even do without. If I have two of something, sacrificial giving means I give the better one away. Sacrificial giving can only be done by faith, not by willpower or by good intentions. Only those with very mature faith are capable of sacrificial giving. Sacrificial giving is not giving out of my abundance and my surplus; it's giving out of my lack, my poverty.

In Second Corinthians, the apostle Paul is encouraging the believers there to follow the example of the believers in Macedonia, who he said:

**Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints (a sacrificial offering of money)... So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (2 Cor. 8:2-4, 6, 7)**

Corinth was a very wealthy area. It was a shipping hub. A place where goods from Italy and Spain passed through on their way to Asia and Egypt and vice versa. I'm sure that in any offering, the Corinthians could put up twice the money than what the Macedonians put up and

they wouldn't even feel the loss. But Paul isn't talking about reaching a certain monetary goal. He's talking about reaching a certain level of spiritual maturity:

**...just as you excel in everything** (think, 'fruit of the Spirit') **–in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.** (2 Cor. 8:7)

Here's the principle: giving sacrificially benefits not only the receiver, but it benefits the giver! How? Not by gaining more earthly wealth. No, you benefit by becoming more like Christ! Think about this for a minute: Is Jesus known for what He accumulated in this life or for what He gave?

In the end, what do you want to be known for? From our youngest days, isn't that a driving force in our lives? Small children say, "When I grow up I want to be a..." And what they say next is some position or vocation that they think in their little brains will bring them notoriety. Right? But now that you're older, how do you want to be remembered? For what you accumulated in this life or for what you gave? And from this category of "sacrificial giving," are you mature enough for your generosity to be known only by God?

In Ellsworth, Maine, there's a Reny's Department Store. Reny's is a chain of stores in Maine that sells good stuff cheap. I think it's like a salvage store that gets stuff from train wrecks or semis that flip over. Wherever they get it, they have good stuff, even name-brand stuff and it's cheap. So, they have an old-fashioned lay-away policy where you can pick something out, like a toy for your child for Christmas, and they'll put it aside for you and you pay it off a little at a time, month by month.

Well, this year, the Reny's store in Ellsworth, Maine, had an anonymous person come in and pay off everything in the lay-away room, which was mostly kid's stuff for Christmas presents. It was worth thousands of dollars. So, when the people came in to make their next payment, they'll be told, "Merry Christmas! A person who wishes to remain anonymous has paid your bill."

Now, that giver isn't going to get any recognition on this earth, but how do you think Jesus feels about them right now?

In Phil. 2, Paul encourages us to have the same attitude as Jesus Christ. He describes that attitude with phrases like "*made himself nothing*," and "*taking the very nature of a servant*," and "*became obedient to death*." In Romans 8, Paul makes this significant statement:

**He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** (Rom. 8:32)

Most of us think of giving as subtracting, don't we? Do you see from our study today – it's not subtracting. The grace of giving, in all its levels, from God's perspective, from eternity's perspective, is multiplying! Whatever the size of your gift, God adds His leverage and it takes on eternal dimensions. Excel at the grace of giving and your gifts, a billion years from now, will still be having impact! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, *The Social Animal* (New York: Random House, 2011), pp. 134-135

<sup>2</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Managing God's Money* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2011), p. 121

<sup>3</sup> "The Secret to David Green's Successful 'Hobby', CBN, Nov. 6, 2010