

THE GIFT OF GIVING

Romans 12:6–8

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We are told at the beginning of chapter 12 to present ourselves a living sacrifice, to renew our minds, and that each of us are to soberly estimate what God has given to us in the way of gifts. God has assigned a measure of faith to each of us. And we all are members of the Body, but we have differing functions.

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously [or, “with liberality”]; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6–8, NIV).

I’m not sure what happens in terms of my preparation for preaching. I set aside time for prayer and study, especially in the selection of an overall book. Like I felt very impressed this year we should go through the Book of Romans. But I did not set down and chart out in Romans exactly where we would be every Sunday. I had no idea. We’d just kind of go along and go where the Spirit may direct. If you would have asked me in the first Sunday of January when we began in Romans 1 where we would be on the first Sunday of December, I’d have had no idea. I might have said we’d be done with Romans by then. I would imagine that would have been so. But of all Sundays—following a missions conference and a seminar on financial giving, or stewardship—to wind up with preaching on “He who contributes, with liberality” is, to me, amazing providence. You could call it a coincidence, or a God-incidence, or whatever you like. In the seven gifts which motivate the Body to perfection in Romans 12—which minister to needs—the gift of giving is listed.

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It has been our assumption, looking at each of these seven gifts, that there are aspects of the gift that are practiced in each of our lives. There are times when we are called upon to prophesy—that is, to discern among others what is right and wrong, what is God’s will. There are times we’re called upon to teach. There are times we’re called upon to serve. There are times we are called upon to encourage. Even as there are times when all of us are called upon to give. This passage of Scripture does not mean that only some give and all the rest do their thing. But there is a kind of commonality in all of these gifts that, in regard to the Body, some especially stand out as uniquely manifesting that gift of the Spirit, the gift of giving.

What is the gift of giving? We might look at the term which Paul uses in the original. It’s more than the simple verb in the English “to give.” Literally translated, it’s “with to give” or “to give with.” The preposition “with” is attached to the verb Paul uses to intensify its meaning.

Therefore, when one gives in this sense of having the gift of giving, he or she is not just taking something and putting it into someone else’s possession. It carries the idea of imparting. It speaks of spending, or making an investment of one’s own life, as he or she communicates through giving.

A person, therefore, who is a giver, who has this quality, is very definitely a supportive type of person. For it involves the giving of themselves, the investment of themselves in the recipient’s life.

Kind of a little test I thought about. You can tell, by and large, a nonsupportive person by the fact that generally—and I’d think this would be one hundred percent true—a nonsupportive person is one who, by and large, never shares genuinely, from his heart, his material resources with others.

If you don’t believe this, take a test of your family—your close family or the larger, extended family this Christmastime. See who it is that, in their giving, what they give always just kills them to give. They have had to give it out of a sense of duty, and you can be sure that they have

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not thought what the recipient might really like, but what they could just get by with. They generally give nonuseful junk because they are not really motivated to minister to another person's needs or wants, but to simply satisfy their own need, to get off the hook that they had indeed met some social requirement. You watch that kind of person in your family, and you'll generally find that they're a nonsupportive person.

What do I mean by nonsupportive? When someone gets in trouble in the family, they do not go to that person for the emotional, financial, psychological, and spiritual help that is needed to get through that crisis because that person has consistently identified himself as a nonsupportive individual.

However, a person who is continually in the act and process of giving and imparting of life becomes an individual who is very much leaned upon in the midst of any crisis, and is just fun to be with as well.

This word for "giving" which Paul uses here in Romans 12:8 is used specifically five times in the New Testament. In its usages, it can refer to the giving of material things and it can also refer to the giving of spiritual things. So we need not relegate the gift of giving to something that's just physical.

In Luke 3:11, it is used to describe the giving of food and clothes. In Romans 1:11 Paul uses it to describe the fact that when he comes to the Romans he wants to impart to them some spiritual gift. And he uses it again in Romans 12:8. Paul uses the term "give," this same verb in Ephesians 4:28 where he says, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his hands so that he may be able to give to those in need." A thief is a taker. Paul says, "Let your attitude so change that instead of being a taker, you now become a giver, imparting from your life and your resources to others."

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Paul tells the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:8: “We are ready to share with you not only the gospel of God [the word “share” is the same word as “give] but also our own selves because you have been very dear to us.” So the idea of giving here is one of intensity.

As we have done consistently in these gifts, we have sought to look in Scripture for a concrete example because that helps us focus in on how the gift is practiced. Perhaps of all the persons in Scripture, other than our Lord Jesus, who stand out as givers, we would maybe have to identify someone from the Old Testament—Abraham—as a person who is consistently marked by having this quality in his life, the gift of giving. There are four qualities within Abraham I want to share with you briefly this morning.

I. He is, first of all, the only person in Scripture to be called the “friend of God.”

James 2:23 so identifies him. This is not to say that other people weren’t the friends of God. But that phrase is specifically reserved by the New Testament writer to describe this Old Testament person, Abraham. That phrase, the “friend of God,” is suggestive of the kind of personality that Abraham had that God liked.

If you think of your circle of friends, you, by and large, choose friends who have commonness with you—who think somewhat the same way, who act somewhat the same way. It’s very difficult to be friends with someone who is headed the opposite direction. As Amos says, “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” So here is Abraham, called the friend of God, walking together with the Lord.

Since God is a God of giving, and John 3:16 identifies Him as a giving God (“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”) it’s not surprising, therefore, that Abraham, who was willing to give his own son at God’s request, should be, in the heart of God, known as the friend of God. It would be extremely difficult for the giving God to be friends with stingy and selfish people. One of the facets of conversion is He takes this self-centeredness out of us and tells us

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that if anyone would come after Him, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Him. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s shall find it”(Mark 8:3). So the Lord is at work eradicating this selfish nature within us and turning us into His people—a loving and generous people. It would even be difficult for you to be a friend to a stingy and self-centered person. It requires an extra measure of grace to do so. So God makes himself friends with people like Abraham.

And the Lord Jesus, in His own teaching, contrasted some persons who really fell short of qualifications of being God’s friend. Two, especially, in the Gospel of Luke.

A. The person known as the “Rich Fool” in Luke 12:16–21, who said, when he looked at his financial statement that had eight to nine zeroes at the bottom, “My storehouses are full. I’m going to tear them down and build bigger ones. The Lord said to him, “You fool. This night shall your soul be required of you.” The Lord, in that story, is not condemning as such the multiplication of his financial resources. But what He is condemning is the sort of spirit that lives only selfishly for what he can collect. And what he had collected, he could not he himself use. He was not transferring it on. Jesus provides his epitaph by saying what his problem was. “So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich towards God.” Of course, the Lord himself taught that one of the ways we are rich towards God is to consider the needs of others.

B. Then there’s the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. Remember, daily at his gate lay this poor man Lazarus. Nowhere in the story of Luke 16 are we told that this man mistreated Lazarus. He didn’t go out and kick him. He didn’t send his vicious watchdogs to go bite him. He sent the tame dogs to lick his sores. We never read of any case of mistreatment of Lazarus. Just the fact that the rich man, Luke tells us, feasted sumptuously every day and dressed himself in purple and linen and the like, and he thought that it was all right for him to exist in his world—and Lazarus out there in the street in his world—without investing of himself at all in the needs

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and affairs of Lazarus's life. So in hell, he lifted up his eyes and sees Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. Abraham reminds him. When the rich man wants to come back to life, he says, "Son, remember that you, in your lifetime, received your good things." Underline "received." He never chose to share his good things or to give his good things. Therefore, he could not be called the friend of God. But Abraham, who is the friend of God—of whom the opposite testimony was true; he shared his good things—is seen as a model for us.

If you want to be a friend of God, then begin seeking of the Lord to eradicate selfishness. If there's a deep self-centeredness within you that keeps clutching and grasping, you may need to pray as Jim Elliott prayed: "Lord, release my hands from the fondling touch."

II. Another quality of Abraham is that God entrusted him with assets.

We needn't think of giving as, "Persons who give don't have anything." Abraham had a lot. He had a lot to give. We're given contrasts in Scripture. The widow with the two mites—she gave everything she had. But Abraham had great assets. We are told, as Abraham is introduced to us in the pages of Scripture, that Abraham was very rich in cattle and silver and gold. Those were the criteria of wealth in his day, and he had it.

Years later, when we find his servant going off to find a wife for Isaac, his son, the servant gives to Rebecca's father some idea of Abraham's wealth. This would be years later. "The LORD has greatly blessed my master, and he has become very great. And he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, menservants and maidservants, camels and asses" (Genesis 24:35). When Abraham starts off following God, he's rich. But as he keeps following God, keeps being a giver, we find him later in his life with more than he began with.

But even though God entrusted him with these assets, he never treated his wealth as something which belonged to him. He modeled what later comes in the Scripture, Deuteronomy 8:17,18: "Beware, lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hands have gotten me this

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wealth.’ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the power to get wealth.”

So Abraham was a person entrusted with assets. And as he gives, he is entrusted with more assets. To the degree that you’re faithful in handling assets, to that degree also will the Lord give you additional assets to give and contribute and use for His kingdom. This is based on the principle: “To him who has, more will be given” (Matthew 13:12).

I see this principle demonstrated every day. Where I first learned this principle in my own life was when, at the age of seventeen, I decided it was time to learn how to play the piano. I was a freshman in college, and I wanted to sing in a gospel quartet. But I could not keep on key. I could sing melody, but I couldn’t sing harmony—essential for gospel quartets. I thought the best I could do was learn to play the piano. I thought, “No problem. I usually do well in studies. I’ll sit down and learn, and in about six months or so I’ll be out playing with the best of them.” I recall sitting down the first day in class at the piano. They gave me this Thompson book for six-year-olds, first-graders. I was tremendously insulted. A seventeen-year old freshman in college, who knew everything, being given a first-grade book. The insult to the insult was the fact that not only was it a first grade book, but I couldn’t make the movement of my eyes coordinate with the movements of my fingers. I couldn’t play the crazy thing.

For one solid semester, I stuck it out—resenting every moment I had to practice at that crazy piano, blaming my mother for not having forced me to practice the piano when I was a child. At the end of the semester, I was shooting for the Dean’s List. And Piano—one hour’s credit—was going to keep me from it, because I was headed at best for a C minus in the course. I went to the professor and asked, “What am I going to get in this course?” He said, “The best I can do is a C minus.” I said, “Can I make a deal with you? If you will give me a B minus (a student knows a

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minus doesn't mean anything; on the transcript it shows up as a B), if you'll give me a B minus, I'll promise you never to take piano again!" After a good deal of haggling, I talked him into it. What is really astounding to me is the fact when I sit down at the piano now the only key I can find on the piano is C. I still know where that is. But even what I learned, those fundamental things I learned in that course, have now fled me because I didn't use them.

Treating our assets is the same way. To the degree that we treat them well—and to the degree that we give and develop generosity in this gift—to that degree the Lord is also able to discipline us in a good sense. Not discipline to punish us, but cause us to be disciplined enough so that, more and more, we become creative and fruitful and expansive in demonstration of this gift. Certainly what is being said of giving is also true of every other gift. As you exercise prophecy, you become a prophet. As you exercise teaching, you teach better. As you serve, you'll serve more ably. As you give, you give better.

III. A third quality in Abraham is he lived a surrendered life.

That's not to say that Abraham was a perfect person. I can point you to some texts of Abraham's life that show him as a big failure. Nor is a surrendered life a kind of gutless life where the person sort of becomes a dead fish in God's hands—and whatever God wants, He just flips the fish and it does it. Abraham had real timbre and quality and fiber in his life, but he was a surrendering person. Four key moments would show him as a giver, surrendering himself to the Lord.

A. The first key moment is when the Lord moves him. Abraham surrenders his location. He was in Ur of the Chaldees and the Lord says, "Get thee out to a country that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). And Abraham is willing, at the Lord's bidding, to surrender the security of his family, of his background, of his home, of his society and civilization—everything—in order to become a pilgrim.

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B. A second way in which he surrendered is in the story of Lot, where he shows clearly he is a surrendering person who depends upon God as his Source. You recall the situation. Lot's flocks and Abraham's flocks grew and increased, and a dispute arose between the servants over the land, which they were both tending. So Abraham took Lot aside and said, "This land is big enough for both of us. Look around and see what you want." Even though, for Abraham, it meant taking the hill country, the more difficult territory, Abraham's confidence was such in God that he could give Lot freedom of choice to determine what he wanted. If Lot wanted to take the fattest land and the best circumstances, that was fine. Because Abraham wasn't dependent upon the land for his living. He had learned to depend upon God as his Source. So Lot says, "I'll take the well-watered plains." It got him in a lot of trouble later. But because Abraham had God as his Source and had surrendered his life, God continued to prosper him. By the way, later Abraham even had to come and rescue Lot. He was a person who was willing to act on behalf of others when a legitimate need demonstrated itself.

C. Another aspect of Abraham as a surrender is he had no trouble in tithing. In Genesis 14, we see this relationship with Melchizedek.

D. Another area, though—and I think the primary area where he lives a surrendered life—is in the yielding up of his son. Notice this principle operative with Abraham's life. To him who has, more will be given. He starts off by changing his location. Then he's willing enough to give up prime land to Lot. Then he's willing to give the Lord a tenth. Finally, a key test comes. And I'm not sure if Abraham's story had begun in Genesis 12 with God calling him to offer up his son, he'd been able. He did not yet have the spiritual strength to pick up those weights. But there comes a moment when the Lord puts him to the test and says to him to offer up his son. His faith is so outstanding—Genesis 22:8 notes it—where he says, as he's about ready to sink the knife into Isaac, and his son is asking him, "Where is the sacrifice?" Abraham replies as a man of

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faith, “God, will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Abraham didn’t realize how deeply these words were prophetic. He didn’t say, “God will provide a burnt offering.” He says prophetically, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Thereby, he not only indicated that God was able to meet that immediate need, but prophetically he spoke beyond what he knew and looked toward that day when God would fill out the picture that He asked Abraham to fulfill in the giving of his own Son. God will provide the Lamb.

That kind of faith in God comes to the people of the Lord who give. Literally, they believe if they follow God’s instructions, God will take care of them. God will provide. He lived a lifetime with God as his Source.

Living this surrendered life, a fourth quality developed in Abraham.

IV. Each act of surrender was followed by the blessing of the Lord.

Each time he gave himself to the Lord in a new way, the Lord came right back at him with more blessing than Abraham had previously experienced. When he surrendered his location to the Lord, in Genesis 12:7, it says: “The LORD appeared to Abraham and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’” When he deferred to Lot, the Lord blessed him and reminded him again of His great promises. When he tithed, the Lord again blessed him and said, “Fear not, Abram. I am your shield. Your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1). And when he offered up his son, the Lord gave him the greatest blessings: “I swear by myself...that because you have done this and not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Genesis 22:16-18).

Abraham’s act of giving his life to the Lord and committing his resources to the Lord. We look at each of these four points—where he changed his location, where he gave to Lot, where he

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tithed, where he gave his son. His motivation in giving was never to get. His motivation was always to obey the Lord and to please Him. Abraham avoided, and I think we should avoid in giving, the heavenly slot-machine mentality—some sort of a magic formula that works like a merit bank. If we put enough of our coins into the slot and pull the right handle, more will come out to us. Just because a selfish person gives does not mean that, in that act of giving, they have become unselfish. A selfish person may give in order then to have more given to them. In the act, the motivation for giving is a selfish one to start with. Then one violates the fundamental principle which the Lord has in giving, which is giving from a sincere heart. And giving and expecting nothing in return. And giving because one loves the Lord. But to those who enter in from this deep conviction of surrendering their life to the Lord, the Lord can't help it. Just like when my little kids please me, I just can't help but take it another step further. There's that natural fatherhood complex of God, which reaches out to embrace, as we seek to please Him. One last word. Paul tells us to give liberally. "He who contributes, with liberality." In the New Testament, the word which is translated here "liberality" is used to mean two different things. I think both meanings may be involved here in Romans 12:8.

One way it is used is to be translated "liberally." Several times in referring to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9—three times—it's used to describe the great liberality of the Corinthian believers in giving to the needs of destitute saints.

The word can also be translated "to give simply," or "to give with simplicity or sincerity." The same word which is used in Romans 12:8 is used in Ephesians 6:5, where we are told to obey with a sincere heart. Not a liberal heart, but a sincere heart. Jesus says, "The eye is the lamp of the whole body. So if your eye is single [if it is sincere] your whole body will be full of light."

The picture underlying this idea of a single heart is that of a piece of cloth or other material which is neatly folded one time without a variety of complicated folds. Hence, out of this one-

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fold aspect arises the idea of simplicity. In fact, the English word “simplicity” comes from a Latin word “simplex,” which means “once to fold; to fold once.” No complications. So the simplicity in giving speaks of giving in a moral sense—guileless, plain, pure, uncomplicated, not drawing attention to the act of giving or seeking any reward from it.

Abraham quietly, simply gave up Isaac. The Father gave us the Son very simply—the Baby at Bethlehem. How much more simply can the greatest gift ever be given? He gave simply and liberally.

So when we look at this gift of giving, we recognize that all of us are called to give in certain measures. Some within our Body will especially, in a unique measure, have the capacity to give and will also have the calling to be a giver. It’s going to be very difficult to spot them in a public setting. Because, unlike the role of teaching and prophecy and speaking gifts, since the giver, when they give, they’re supposed to give with the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. They’re to give in secret. It’s going to be very difficult to recognize them. The person will become known in a quiet sort of way—these people, with their great supportiveness, and their life will be blessed.

A poem says to us, “Only one life to live, will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.” So we’re challenged in the Scriptures through Abraham’s experience to become the friend of God. To use what assets He has entrusted us with. To surrender our life to the Lord. And to experience His blessing. All of these are qualities of our Lord himself, who, as we’re taking communion this morning, reminds us once more of the fact that the essence of our faith is the gift of life which God provided to us through the sacrifice of His Son.

Closing Prayer

Our loving Father, we come to You in this moment, and we’re just confessing so much in faith today. We did not see You die on the cross. We did not see You suffer for us. We did not see

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You rise again from the dead. We have instead believed on the testimony of the witnesses to You and the inward dwelling of the Spirit who has brought us the good news that our sins are forgiven. That we have received, through faith in You, the gift of eternal life. Our lives are so radically altered and changed, Lord, through Your coming. We praise You for what You're doing in our midst. We thank You, Lord Jesus, for the lives in the last Sunday services that came to confess You as Lord and Savior. We thank You, Lord, that You want to do this again today as we share communion. You want to present Yourself as the Gift of life and love to every heart here that is without You. You want to undertake to meet every need which we have, to convince us in a very special and real way of Your goodness and love for us. That you're not willing that anybody should perish. That anybody should be a failure in life. That anyone should come unglued as a result of emotional pressures and depressions. That anyone should have to cave in under the biting circumstances of life. Or that anyone should have to be drained of emotional resources and not knowing how to handle a very difficult home situation. You have come, the great Giver of life and love, to minister Your presence to us in these moments.

So we ask now, as we prepare to receive this communion, that You will awaken in our heart the right words of praise that we can, in this moment, bring to You. That You will kindle the right responses to You. That You will bless Your people as we receive these emblems of Your broken body and Your shed blood. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.