

January 12/13, 2008

## **Money Talks**

### **2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

Pastor Bryan Clark

#### **Video**

Interestingly enough, it was just three years ago this weekend that we as a Board met and wrestled late into the evening about this realization that God was leading us to take a significant step of faith. Even over a 40-year period of time, there were still only a handful of those special moments that were big steps of faith that would ultimately define the effectiveness of the church and the ability of the church to continue to be about the mission and ultimately to end up where we are today.

I'm guessing nobody 20 years ago really understood the thousands and thousands and thousands of lives that they would ultimately touch, not only here in Lincoln but in India and around the world by their steps of faith. What began to go through my mind and through my heart over and over again was the question: Is it possible that if we as leaders don't have the courage and the faith to trust God, that we could cost an entire generation their opportunity to see God do something significant in our lifetime?

The reality was I just couldn't live with that. I couldn't live with myself knowing that we had lacked the courage and the faith to enter into what God had promised and an entire generation would miss their opportunity. So I explained to the men that night that that is what God had placed on my heart and the realization that I would rather die in the battle trying to take the land than to one day die in the wilderness having never been willing to try by faith. We agreed together that that was our heart.

So that night we got on our knees and we prayed before God and we committed that we would be willing to take our step of faith, a step that would represent a defining moment for our generation as we seek to continue to be faithful to what God has called us to.

So January of '04 we announced the *For This Purpose I Live* campaign. By that time the vision had crystallized itself to where God was leading us to a number of different initiatives, not only to build the new auditorium, but also to build a 22,000-square-foot youth complex; in addition to that to give off people and plant two churches: one in the inner city, one on the north side of Lincoln; in addition to that to identify, equip and fully fund 100 church planters in India; in addition to that to launch a one-year Christian leadership college—all of that to be accomplished in a three-year window.

It's very important to understand that night we did not give out charts and graphs and look at all the finances and come to the conclusion: *We can do this*. There wasn't any of that. As a matter of fact, we were all overwhelmed, and frankly we're still all overwhelmed. It was an issue of whether or not we were going to be obedient, because every one of us understood that evening in our heart that God was calling us to take a step of faith. To choose to do otherwise that night would have been an act of disobedience. At some point, each generation has to settle in and take their step of faith and trust God to be faithful to provide.

#### **Video Testimonies**

## Message

We thought on this weekend, since we would be talking about money and stewardship, it would be a good time just to go back and remember a little bit and celebrate what God has done. Those of you that have just joined our family in the last several months, it's probably hard for you to appreciate the journey we've been on over the last four years as a church family, but it's really been quite a remarkable journey.

At a time when giving was stagnant and declining, God called us to take a 16 million dollar step of faith that included not only this auditorium but the other initiatives that we talked about in the video. Clearly we were all overwhelmed by that. We made a very strategic decision that we didn't want to move into fundraising mode. What we wanted to do was try to cultivate a culture of generosity that would endure and define us long into the future.

What has transpired not only in the lives of people but just financially has been absolutely remarkable. Over these last four years our attendance has gone up 14 percent, which is actually a very conservative number, but most of that time we were fighting space limitations. But during that same time period as attendance has gone up 14 percent, overall giving has gone up 100 percent. It is exactly doubled—from four million dollars a year to eight million dollars a year. I had the privilege this past week to share that with a number of my pastor friends in the community, and they celebrated with us that that is absolutely remarkable—almost unheard of.

We celebrate what God has done among us. I think what so many people in the body have experienced is what I refer to as the law of the harvest. If you have a Bible this morning, turn with us to 2 Corinthians chapter 9. If you're visiting with us this morning, no, we don't always talk about money but we do a couple of times in January and typically once in August. You just happen to have excellent timing. But we do think it's very important to understand what God says about money. Understanding this law of the harvest is very important to become a joyful and generous giver.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 8 and into chapter 9 through verse 5, Paul is calling upon the Corinthian church to give a generous financial gift to help some other churches that are struggling. Starting then at verse 6, he shares with them the law of the harvest in order to motivate them to give this gift. Verse 6:

**Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.** (\*NASB, 2 Corinthians 9:6)

Every farmer understands the law of the harvest. If you sow a little seed, you'll have a little harvest. If you sow much seed, you'll have a bountiful harvest. Now I happen to be a tree lover. I'm not a tree hugger but I am a tree lover. When Patti and I moved out into the country several years ago, there was not a single tree on our property. So I've been on a mission to plant trees. My girls call it an obsession. I don't know that it's quite to that level, but I do understand the fact that if in 20 years from now I want lots of trees, right now I have to plant lots of trees. I can't plant two trees today and expect a forest in 20 years. It simply doesn't work that way.

Now this is not complicated. This isn't some great wisdom. There's nobody out here this morning whose mouth is dropping open, saying: *Wow, that is really insightful!* But for some reason, we have a disconnect when it comes to God. We have convinced ourselves that we can sow little and reap much. We think we can sow a little bit of our time, a little bit of service, a little bit of our

money—and then if God doesn't bring a big harvest, we think somehow God has been unfair to us. And we don't really understand the principle of the law of the harvest.

To me that would be the equivalent of a farmer going out into the field this spring with a handful of seed, throwing it into the field, and then that fall, when there are just a few stalks of corn, calling the seed manufacturer and saying, "You ripped me off! My harvest is the smallest it has ever been."

There is a realization that if you're only going to sow a little seed, you should expect a little harvest. One of the things I've learned over the years is that one of the most important things in our lives is balance. It seems like we get ourselves into trouble when we get out of balance, in a number of different areas.

Clearly that's true in the world of theology. Some of the worst theology is a reaction to other bad theology. There's a tendency for that pendulum to swing from one extreme to the other, and that's not a good way to understand truth. For example, because there are extremists who have abused the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (and when I say abused, I'm talking about even my charismatic pastor friends in town would say this isn't abuse; I'm talking about an extreme), because of that extreme abuse, our movement, in my opinion, swung the pendulum clear to the other side where it's hard to tell if Pentecost really happened or not. And I think, frankly, we're still trying to figure out where the middle is on that one.

I also think the same thing is true in this law of the harvest. Because the prosperity preachers have so abused this principle—where they preach this message of prosperity where God is like the ultimate consumer and you give to get in order that you might live these excessive lifestyles, and somehow that makes God happy—because of that abuse, the pendulum often swings clear to the other side where we fail to acknowledge what is *clearly* stated in this text.

What is wrong with understanding that God is a very generous God, and God longs to be very generous to His people? We are never more like God than when we give, because God is a giving God. That's part of His nature. The law of the harvest is simple: If you sow bountifully, you should expect to reap bountifully. That's exactly what the text says. Now that is not limited to money, as we'll see in just a minute. But it also does not exclude money. That's clearly the focus of the discussion of the text, and we need to understand clearly what God is saying. Verse 7:

**Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver [God loves a joyful giver].** (vs. 7)

Giving is something that should be done thoughtfully. It's something that should be done prayerfully. It's not something that should be done because of some compulsion or some guilt. When we, week in and week out, take an offering in a worship service, we very much include the offering as an element of worship. But it's also not a production. Nobody stands up and gives a five-minute talk, trying to convince you to give more.

Our mindset would be: *You should have thought about that and prayed about that before you came. If you did not plan to give, we don't want you to give. If you thoughtfully and prayerfully came to give, we want you to give as God has purposed in your heart.* So the offering is not a production; it's just simply an element of our worship.

If you find yourself giving grudgingly or out of some compulsion, the reality is God doesn't want that gift. God doesn't want you to give it because you have to. God doesn't want you to give it with some sort of a resentful spirit. God wants you to give joyfully. God wants you to give because you want to give.

Now what makes a cheerful giver? Well, there are a couple of things. One is understanding that when you give, you don't give it away. The language here is very specific. It's talking about sowing. When you sow a seed, you're not throwing it away. You're investing it into the ground, expecting a harvest.

Do you suppose in the spring, after a day of planting, the farmer goes home and is angry and says to his wife, "I am so angry tonight! I just spent all that money on seed, and all day long I've just been throwing it away"? Well, of course a farmer understands he's not throwing it away; he's sowing the seed. The only way you get a harvest in the fall is if you sow the seed in the spring.

The language here is clear. Jesus said the same thing: that when you give to God, you're laying up for yourselves treasures in heaven. In this case, it's the imagery of a farmer: you're sowing a seed, expecting a harvest.

So we give joyfully, understanding I'm not giving it away; I'm sowing. And because I'm sowing, I'm expecting some sort of a harvest in return. That makes me joyful. It's an investment. But it's more than that, and he talks about it in this passage. Verse 8:

**And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed;** (vs. 8)

When you give to God, in essence what you're declaring is: *God, I believe that You are my provider. I believe that You are the one who is sufficient to meet my every need, and this is a very tangible pledge of my faith to You.* It's probably the most tangible response of faith that we make. We're saying: *God, I want You to know I trust You, and I believe You'll be sufficient for my every need.*

This is a great passage for us, because it's in such alignment with the Book of Colossians, which is the book that we've been studying that teaches us about the sufficiency of Christ. When I give, I'm saying I believe that. When I choose not to give to God, what I'm saying is: *God, I want You to know I don't think You can be trusted with this area of my life. I think I better take charge of this area of my life, because I think I'll do a better job than You. So God, I just need You to know I'm going to be in charge and not You. I'll be my own sufficiency, not You.*

Look at what Paul says in this passage in verse 8. It's kind of choppy; let's break it down into its parts. *"And God is able [which means He has the power] to make all grace abound [which means God has the desire to pour His favor on you; God is a generous God and He wants to pour His favor; He has both the power and the desire], so that always having all sufficiency in everything...."*

That is a very comprehensive statement: *"always having all sufficiency in everything."* Now can you name for me one thing that's out from under that umbrella? *"Always having all sufficiency in everything."* It's God saying: *When you trust Me, I have the power, I have the desire to be sufficient for your every need all the time—no exceptions.*

If we really believe that's true, then it creates a joy in our hearts when we give to God, because it's our pledge of faith, saying: *God, I understand if tomorrow the bottom drops out of my world, You will be sufficient.* So there's a peace in my heart. There's a sense in which no matter what comes my way, God will give me what I need because He's always sufficient for everything.

Those of you that choose not to give to God, the thing I would challenge you with this morning is to think about the arrangement you're making with God and ask you this question: Are you sure that's what you want to say to God? Are you sure that's the deal you want? If tomorrow the doctor says it's cancer, if tomorrow you lose your job, if tomorrow you find out your child is very sick, you have a wayward teenager, your marriage is falling apart—the bottom drops out of your world—are you sure at that moment the arrangement you want is: *God, I'll take care of it myself. I'll be my own sufficiency?*

It's easy to say, you know: *It doesn't work that way. I understand the doctrine of grace, and even if we don't necessarily give to God and necessarily trust Him with everything, in our hour of need, God is a God of grace—He will come through.*

So what you're saying is you can sow little and reap a bountiful harvest. Interesting! Could you show me where the Bible teaches that? Now it's true, God is a God of grace and He can choose to do anything He wants. We can't box Him in. But that is really presuming upon the grace of God. What I read clearly stated is if you sow little, you will reap little. And if you sow generously, you can expect a generous harvest. People that understand that, give joyfully because they know that their sufficiency is in Jesus.

But the text doesn't limit God to just meeting our need, it says *that "you may have an abundance [even more than you need] for every good deed"* [in other words, to turn around and do something good with the abundance]. Then he quotes Psalm 112:

**As it is written, "HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER." (vs. 9)**

If you look at Psalm 112, the psalmist is talking about a righteous man who trusts God, and God pours out His favor upon him. He turns around with the abundance and he helps the poor and the needy. So God gives him more. And he gives away more. He's identified then as a righteous man, one who does the right thing with the abundance that God has given. Verse 10:

**Now He who supplies seed to the sower [of course that's God] and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. (vs. 10)**

In other words, the God that gives you seed that brings about the harvest that is used for bread and meets your need, is also the God who is going to bring you an abundance of harvest so not only do you have bread (in other words, meeting your needs) but you have more than what you need in order that you might do the right thing with it, which is the idea of righteousness.

**...you will be enriched.... (vs. 11a)**

That Greek work translated "enriched" is a word that means single-minded or focused. I think that's a better translation, because that's what he's saying here. The righteous person is the one who takes

the abundance and remains single-minded or focused in order to use that abundance for God's purposes.

**...you will be enriched [or single-minded] in everything for all liberality [in other words, all generosity], which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service [he's talking about giving; that's how he defines it in verse 1] is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God.** (vs. 11-12)

What he's saying here is that when you sow a seed to God, God gives back generously. When you get the abundance, if you remain single-minded, then you turn around and you sow the abundance for God's purposes, that God may bring forth a bigger harvest with more abundance, that you may turn around and sow the abundance again. In other words, what God wants are people who will be a conduit to continue to remain focused, to sow His seed to bring forth His harvest.

The challenge is, oftentimes as God pours out His favor, it changes us. It changes our value system. It changes our focus and we lose our way. I am convinced that one of the reasons God doesn't bless many of us financially is because of what it would do to us. Something about that begins to change us and we start losing our way.

But there are those who have this uncanny ability to stay single-minded and focused. They take the abundance and they re-sow it for God's purposes. God brings forth more, and they sow more.

This is where we part company with the prosperity preachers. The prosperity preachers teach that you give in order to get in order to consume, to live this extravagant lifestyle. So the formula is you sow in order to reap in order to consume. But what the passage says is *you sow in order to reap in order to sow, in order to reap in order to sow for God's eternal purposes.*

Now if you were here last week, one of the things I challenged us with is be very careful not to judge other people—because you really don't know their story. Sometimes within the church it seems like there's a resentment of those people that have more, as if somehow that means they're worldly or ungodly. But how do you know what their story is? How do you know that they didn't by faith give very generously and God gave back, and they've given very generously and God has given back?

There's nothing wrong with people having a nice home that they can afford. There's nothing wrong with people driving a nice car. But how do you know that these people haven't been *extremely* generous? We have many families like that. Do they live in a very nice home? Yes, they do. Do they drive very nice vehicles? Yes, they do. But they are incredibly generous to the kingdom. Their story would be that they have given generously to God, and God has brought forth a harvest and they've had the ability to stay focused and they give generously to God. God gives back and they start to realize they can't outgive God. Rather than resenting these people, we should celebrate these people for their ability to stay focused and faithful.

The law of the harvest is understanding sowing and reaping, and sowing and reaping for God's purposes. I know it's easy for those that don't have as much money to look at people of means and say: *You know, if I had that much money, I'd be generous too.* No, you wouldn't. If you aren't generous with what you have today, you wouldn't be generous with more. As a matter of fact, statistics show the opposite. People tend to become less generous the more they have. No, the

reason these people are very generous is because they're generous. It's an issue of heart, not how much money they make. As they have been faithful with what they've been given, God has given more.

If you aren't generous with what you have today, you aren't going to be generous with more. We have a saying in our culture: Money talks. We say in our culture: Money screams. What does money scream? What does it yell? It yells: *This is my value system!*

The reality is, if you were to show me what you've done with your money over the past year, I could tell you what your value system is. That's what Jesus said. "*Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is.*" Well, that's exactly the point that Paul makes here.

**Because of the proof given by this ministry** [again, the ministry is giving—okay, when we give generously to God we prove something, what do we prove?], **they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ** [in other words, when you give generously to God, what you prove is that you actually believe your confession, that you actually believe what you say you believe about the Gospel of Jesus Christ] **and for the liberality** [or the generosity] **of your contribution to them and to all, while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!** (vs. 13-15)

What Paul is saying is that when what we do with our money lines up with what we say we believe, we provide a witness in this consumer culture to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we really believe that God has given to us the indescribable gift of Jesus, then we are never more like Jesus than when we give.

I would encourage all of us to give careful consideration to the law of the harvest and then to respond accordingly. But I think the law of the harvest is not only true of individuals, it's true of churches. To expect a bountiful harvest, we have to be willing to sow bountiful seed. When we built this auditorium, most of the response was positive. But there were those within our community that were not so positive. There were a few that said shame on us for spending all this money on a building—money that could have been used to feed the hungry and house the homeless.

Well, there are a number of errors in that line of thinking. Number one, it implies that God has limited resources: that because God did this, God can't do that. The last I knew, He had no limitation on His resources, so that really doesn't make sense. In addition to that, there's an assumption that because we did this, we didn't do that. That's not true either. We've put hundreds of thousands of dollars into different ministries and organizations within our community that do those things. So it's not an either/or.

More than anything else, I would ask the question: What is a community? Is it its buildings? Or is it its people? One out of every 50 people in the city of Lincoln is a part of our family here. And what have we done for our family? We've tried to help them through the Gospel of Jesus Christ be better husbands, better wives, better fathers and mothers, and better students, and better employers and better employees, and better citizens. We've tried to be there in their times of need and in their moments of crisis.

Just in '07 alone we gave away more than \$43,000 to people just to help them pay their light bill, to pay their rent, to deal with the crisis in their life, to help them get through a tough time. It would

seem to me that we have made a significant investment into our community because the people of our family go out into every corner of this community and make it a better place, that they represent the light of Jesus.

At the end of the day, a community is its people. But we also understand this auditorium represents the sowing of a seed. This isn't an end in itself. This is the sowing of a very bountiful seed, anticipating a very bountiful harvest in order that we might sow more seed, in order that we might experience more harvest, in order that we might sow more seed, in order that we might continue to impact this community and the world for the cause of Jesus Christ.

It's very important for those of you who give and give generously to never lose sight of the fact that when you give, you aren't paying for a building. You're giving to change people's lives. At the end of the day, that's what you've invested in. So many of you have given so generously over the last four years, investing your resources into the lives of people. Has it been worth it? I'll let you answer that question.

## **Video of Baptisms**

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## Study Questions

### Money Talks

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Pastor Bryan Clark

### Opening Disussion

1. Discuss the law of sowing and reaping. How does what we sow impact what we reap in all areas of life?
2. Is it possible to reap a bountiful spiritual harvest with God without sowing financial seeds with God? Why or why not?
3. In what practical ways does your giving affect your spiritual growth? Compare your Christian walk before and after your decision to give. What difference has your giving made to your relationship with Christ?

### Bible Study

1. Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.
2. What does Paul say about sowing and reaping as it relates to our giving? Compare Jesus' words in Luke 6:33.

Practically speaking, what are Jesus and Paul trying to tell us? Is it wrong to be motivated to give by the law of the harvest? Why did Jesus and Paul tell us this if it wasn't to motivate us to be cheerful givers?

What is the difference between what Paul is saying and the "health, wealth and prosperity gospel" that is so popular today?

3. What is the reward of being a cheerful giver according to 2 Corinthians 9:8-10?
4. Read Psalm 112 which Paul quotes in 2 Corinthians 9:9. Summarize the lifestyle of the righteous person according to this psalm.

Can a person live a righteous lifestyle without giving generously to God? Why or why not?

5. Paul makes the case in 2 Corinthians 9:13-19 that our cheerful and generous giving lends "proof" that we truly confess the indescribable gospel of grace, thus enhancing God's reputation. Why is that?

In what way is our giving a natural outflow of our confession of the gospel of grace?

## Application

1. According to Paul what is necessary to experience a spiritual harvest?

What does that mean for you personally?

2. Consider your giving to be a measurement of what you really believe about the gospel of grace. Is your lifestyle (especially your money management) consistent with what you say you believe about the gospel of grace? If not, what specific areas do you need to address?
3. For those who have been financially involved in the *Purpose* campaign these past years, share how your steps of faith have impacted your life spiritually.
4. For those not yet involved in the joy of giving, prayerfully consider sowing cheerfully and bountifully to experience God's harvest.