



Gift & Estate Planning

Why We Give: Christian Principles For Giving

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“The world asks, ‘What does a man own?’ Christ asks, ‘How does he use it?’”
-- Andrew Murray (1828-1917)

Introduction: The Giving Heart of God

“God so loved the world that He gave ...”

John 3:16 is probably the best loved, most widely known, and most oft-cited verse in the entire Bible. Christians memorize it from childhood. They quote it when sharing Christ with their unsaved friends. It appears in tracts and pamphlets, on T-shirts, bumper-stickers, and key-chains. Zealous believers placard it before the watching world at major sporting events. And all for a good reason – because this short verse communicates the essence of the Gospel message.

But John 3:16 is more than a Christian promotional slogan or an effective witnessing tool. In an important sense, it reveals the heart of God and sums up the meaning of the Christian life. Because if there’s one thing the New Testament teaches us, it’s that God is love, and that those of us who claim to believe in Him ought to love one another as He has loved us (1 John 4:8, 11). And the message of John 3:16 is that love gives.

Why Give?

Here we have the basic motivation behind all Christian giving: we share what we have with others because, as believers, we are called to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1) – in other words, joyous, generous, and faithful givers. Our goal and purpose in this life is to open our hearts to the Lord so that the resources of His love can flow through our hands directly into the lives of others. As Jesus says in John 15:5, “I am the vine and you are the branches.”ⁱ The life-producing sap of the vine is love expressed in active giving.

But before we can begin to give sincerely and effectively, we need to understand exactly why generosity is so essential to the formation of Christ-like character. More precisely, we need to see how, in a practical sense, the act of giving is an expression of a genuinely Christian and biblical worldview. There are three thoughts that can help us keep the answers to these questions clearly focused in our minds.

1) We Belong to God

“Do you not know,” writes Paul to the Corinthian church, “that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit ... and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price.” (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

Christians, according to Scripture, are the Lord’s special possession – “a peculiar people,” as the Authorized King James Version puts it (1 Peter 2:9). If, as believers, we have no claim even to our own persons, it’s safe to assume that we must also forfeit ownership and control of our possessions. Everything we have and everything we are is a gift from the Creator of our souls – after all, “what do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7) Accordingly, we need to live in a way that places all of these gifts – our time, our talents, our relationships, our physical health and intellectual abilities – at His disposal and discretion.

This is not to mention, of course, that even in a larger and more general sense – in a way that has implications for those who are not part of the family of faith – God is the Owner of everything that exists. Ultimately, it all belongs to Him. “The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness,” writes the psalmist, “the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). Who has preceded Me, that I should pay him? Everything under heaven is Mine” (Job 41:11). “‘The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,’ says the Lord of hosts” (Haggai 2:8).

If God owns everything, it should be obvious that He alone has the prerogative to determine how it should be distributed and used. And if, as we’ve already established, His purposes can be summed up in the single word “love,” we can safely assume that He intends His wealth to be applied to the task of blessing other people. Our role is to act as faithful stewards of the abundance He has poured out upon us by giving in accord with His will. As Randy Alcorn says, we are God’s money managers.

2) We Have Received Much

And God’s grace toward us is abundant – excessively so. This is the second point we want to bear in mind. If we would simply stop and take stock of our blessings, we would quickly see how truly overwhelming is the Lord’s generosity toward us. This statement applies to believers in every condition and situation, for in Christ we have become heirs of God’s kingdom (James 2:5; Romans 8:17) and of the unlimited assets that pertain to it: “For all things are yours ... and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). But it’s especially true of Christians in the West, and particularly in the United States, who control an amount of the world’s resources out of all proportion to their numbers.

According to the Bible, abundant blessings imply weighty responsibilities; “for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48). The message is clear: our possessions are to be used not merely for our own enjoyment but for the benefit of the world around you. “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

This doesn't mean that giving is to be approached as a grim, oppressive "duty," of course. "Let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). As its etymological root implies, a responsibility is primarily a response. It's an expression of joy and gratitude for the bounty of God's goodness. It's like the gift of the woman who demonstrated her indebtedness to Jesus by anointing His feet with a jar of costly ointment. She loved much, Jesus said, because she had been forgiven much. "But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (Luke 7:47).

3) Money Matters

Finally, if we want to make sure that our giving is thoroughly biblical in nature, there's one last observation we'll need to add to the other two. Although the generosity with which we express our response to God's grace entails everything we are and everything we have – our mental, emotional, and spiritual assets as well the physical – we dare not miss the point that the Lord is especially concerned about the way we use our material wealth. As Randy Alcorn points out in his book *The Treasure Principle*, 15 percent of everything Christ ever said relates to the topic of money and possessions – "more than His teachings on heaven and hell combined."ii

Why should this be so? Because the God of the Bible, unlike the gods of many other religious systems, attaches great value to the material aspect of His creation. The physical world belongs to Him because He made it; and He made it in such a way that it declares His glory (Psalm 19:1) and reflects His invisible attributes (Romans 1:20). That's why, at the end of the sixth day of Creation, He was able to look at everything He had accomplished and conclude that it was "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Naturally, one of the most important elements of the material creation is the physical aspect of humanity. God made man in His own image (Genesis 1:27), and He attaches a value to human life far above that accorded to any other creature (Psalm 8:5; Matthew 6:26). He loves and cherishes His people and cares profoundly about the bodily side of their existence. So important does he consider this facet of human nature, in fact, that He actually took flesh upon Himself when He came into the world to save it (John 1:14). What's more, He raised the body of Christ from death and promised a share in that same resurrection to all who believe in Him (John 11:25), thus making it clear that the body has an important place in the life to come as well as in this present world.

This is why James tells us that it is not enough to give in a spiritual sense only. When we minister to others, we have to minister to the body as well as the soul: "If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:16)

Herein lies the real significance of money from the biblical perspective. While it is true that the love of money is “a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10), it should be equally obvious that money is a powerful tool – the most powerful tool we have at our disposal when it comes to providing for basic material necessities. As the writer of Ecclesiastes puts it, “wisdom is a defense as money is a defense” (Ecclesiastes 7:12). The most important and most blessed thing we can do with our money, then, is to give it away for the benefit of those in need. As Paul wrote to Timothy,

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Taking The Next Step

All of this sounds good in theory, of course. But the joy of giving can’t begin to flow in our lives until we make a commitment to put these scriptural principles into practice.

So go ahead. Unclench your fist. Open your hand. Become a conduit of God’s love – the love that expresses itself in hilarious giving. The first step is always the hardest. But it’s also the biggest, because it puts you across the line that divides self-centered concern from grateful generosity.

And remember: it’s not the size of the gift that counts. Part of what makes the life of giving so exhilarating is the realization that, when we hand our meager resources over to God, they assume a power out of all proportion to their earthly size and value. As in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, little becomes much when it is sacrificed on the altar of faith and service to others.

For true value lies not in the possession of a thing, but in the use we make of it.

ⁱ All scriptural quotations are taken from *The New King James Version* (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2002).

ⁱⁱ Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), 8.