

GOD AS THE GIVER

What does it mean to see God as ... Giver? And how does that relate to seeing myself as a giver? As Christians, we are called to give of our time, our talents and our money. Is that easier to do when we experience a giving God? Whose giving comes first or does that even matter? How long has it been since you have experienced ... God's gift?

REST STOP #1: Shopping for Pearls

I love the parables of Jesus. They are like little packages of dynamite. They float along, telling a story that seems so common, so predictable. Then, whammy! Jesus slams his listeners, and me, with this wild twist of an ending. They never cease to fascinate me, to challenge me, to surprise me.

And sometimes they make me feel guilty ... oh so guilty.

Take the parable of the pearl in Matthew 13:45-46. Here the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant specializing in pearls. He finds one and then goes and sells all that he owns to buy it. It makes all the sense in the world. This great pearl, round and luminous, is worth more than all his accumulated possessions put together. He wants that pearl more than anything else. So he sells everything.

I have read these two sentences many times. Every time the same meaning hits me square in the eyes. You're supposed to sell everything you have, Michele. Sell it all. Do the ultimate.

Make the ultimate sacrifice.

The next thoughts that engulf me go something like this: "I can't do that. I've got a family to provide for. It's too radical. Nobody else is doing that." And maybe more than anything else, I think, "I don't want to do that." Yes, I reason in my head, yes, God is worth more than all my possessions. But if that is true, then, why don't I sell all my stuff?

One day several years ago I was reading this chapter and I ran across this parable again. I sighed as I read it. I wanted so much to take this passage seriously (I still do). I stopped and waited in the silence. And while I don't remember actually saying a prayer, God heard my confusion, desire and guilt, and led me back to the printed page.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it."

"Who do you think the pearl is, Michele?" I heard a voice inside me ask. Who do you think is the merchant? And then I heard, not a literal voice, but deep inside me, the voice of God, saying to me, "Michele, I am the merchant. Michele, you are the pearl."

My eyes welled up in tears. All this time, all the time I thought I was supposed to be the merchant. God sold everything ... for me?

Now I know why some people joyfully, almost gleefully, give away all their earthly possessions. They know the secret. God is the first merchant. God makes the first sacrifice.

And they—we—are the pearl.

I am God's pearl.

REST STOP #2: Giving in God's Kingdom

II Corinthians 8-9 give us a picture of a real pastor with a real congregation struggling with issues of generosity. Paul walks a tightrope with the Corinthian church, tiptoeing between gentle encouragement and soft-pedaled prodding. Ideally this congregation was to give freely, following the pattern of Jesus' generosity. But they (and sometimes we) didn't feel the desire to give, even though they knew the story of Jesus. How much do we push ourselves to give even when we don't feel it? Do we stop giving if we can't be cheerful givers? Or does the giving itself help foster the "cheerfulness?"

Interact with these scriptures and the questions. Pray that you can hear and receive what God is saying to you.

II Cor. 9:6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Do I believe that? Is Paul talking about money here or something else? In what areas of my life do I sow sparingly? Where do I take risks? Where do I really invest my time, talents and money?

9:7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

What does it mean to make up your mind about giving? Do you sometimes feel compelled to give? What would help you become a more cheerful giver?

9:8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

Every blessing? Abundance? Always having enough of everything? Do you believe that? Can you trust God for that? Does this mean you can have every material possession you want? And why are we given enough of everything? Do you live out that purpose?

9:9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever."

Check out Psalm 112 where this verse is originally found. Does this psalm describe your life?

9:10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

Do you believe this? In some way can you abuse this promise (give for the wrong reasons)? Do you sometimes forget that the harvest here is of righteousness and not of material wealth? (Matthew 13:1-9)

9:11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us

How has God enriched you? Have you given God thanks for these blessings?

9:12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to just overflow with thanksgiving? Can our giving actually lead to this?

9:13-14 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you.

How does obedience fit in with giving cheerfully and without compulsion? We give because of the surpassing grace God has given us. So what does that mean when we don't give?

9:15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

What is this indescribable gift? The gift of grace making us able and willing to be generous? Or the gift of Jesus? How long as it been since you have been speechless about God's gift?

REST STOP #3: Choosing our Stories

One of the most interesting Bible stories for me is the story of the Exodus. Here were all these slaves, under the oppressive thumb of Pharaoh. They cried out to a God they barely knew, and God answered them by sending terrifying plagues upon Egypt. And when Pharaoh changed his mind and decided to fetch them back, they walked through a wall of water to safety on the other side. Then the waters crashed on the Egyptian army. What an incredible experience! What a life-changing event!

So I'm a bit astounded by Deuteronomy 6:20-25. I'm astounded that Moses had to say what he did. Moses told the Israelites what to do, what to say, when their children asked about the motive for observing the statutes of the law. Tell them the story. That's the advice Moses gave. Tell them the story.

Why? Because before the slaves deserved it, the LORD rescued them from their oppression. So they followed these statutes out of gratitude, a gratitude that came from experiencing such grace, a gratitude that came from knowing the story.

Other scriptures follow this same pattern. Deuteronomy 26:5-10 records the annual storytelling ritual that the Israelites performed for hundreds of years after the Exodus event. This religious ceremony involved bringing the first crops from the harvest to the priest. Then, as the priest received the offering and placed it before the altar, every Israelite would say, "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor ..." Every Israelite would tell the story.

And as the story was told, the past became the present. The recital in Deuteronomy 26:5-10 begins in third person, but by the time the story gets to the harsh treatment by the Egyptians, the pronouns shift from "he" to "we." We cried to the LORD, and the LORD heard our voice and ...the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The story was so important, so real, that the past became the present. People spoke of an event that happened hundreds of years earlier as if it had just happened to them.

And this event—their rescue and deliverance—was the motive for their offering. After the

re-telling of how the LORD brought them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, they said, "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." The response—the offering—was the natural result of God's initial act of grace.

The Ten Commandments don't really begin with "You shall have no other gods before me," but with "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The grace comes before the response. Joshua, in the Shechem covenant, begins with a re-telling of the story, the whole story, before he puts the challenge before them. "Choose you this day whom you will serve." Even now, after all God had done for them, they could still choose to walk away.

Why do we do the things we do? What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded us? (Verse 20) Most of these decrees and laws that Moses was referring to concerned the giving of offerings. So the question for us might be, "Why do we put money in the offering plate?"

Because, before we deserved it (as if we ever could) we were rescued from our oppression. "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Knowing this, knowing the story, we give out of gratitude. It only makes sense.

But what if the story isn't enough? Sometimes, for me, the story just doesn't seem like enough. I know, in my head, what Jesus has done for me, and what he is still doing inside me, yet I complain about the hardness of a disciplined life. I know how God has provided for me, at times in miraculous ways, and yet I hesitate to trust enough to give my first fruits offerings. Do I think God's not going to come through this time? Is the story just not real for me?

The Israelites also struggled with this. You would think that seeing the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea would be enough to motivate people for generations, but they weren't fifty miles out of Egypt before they were complaining. The miracles kept coming, but every year it was a struggle to give the first of the crop. What if the rest of the crop failed?

I have no easy answer for this. Jesus isn't some special pill I can take and get my wish automatically. Who wouldn't have faith if that were so? We need the story, but we also need to experience God, to experience the cross and resurrection personally. It has to become our story. We have to cross the Red Sea ourselves. We have to take that first brave step into the water.

That happens when we begin to say yes to Jesus. And saying yes means taking a step of faith, giving the gross tithe from the first paycheck, trusting in God even when we don't "feel it."

And especially when we don't feel it, we tell the story. We say yes to the story. And our hearts, when we least expect it, well up with gratitude.

REST STOP #4: Praying through the Palm Pilot

Have you ever wondered what your real priorities are? One way to find out is to do a weekly or monthly check at how you spend your time, talent and money.

Make a simple table or spreadsheet. Label columns with general categories where you spend your money. Then take your checkbook and look over the last week or month. For what things have you spent your money? What percentage went to family items, fun things, utilities, food and clothing? What percentage went to the government? What percentage went to the church?

Now comes the big question: Do these percentages communicate your true priorities? Of course they do. But are these the priorities you really want?

Now glance through your palm pilot or date book. Make the categories again. How much time did you spend at your job last week or last month? With your family? How much time did you spend taking spiritual care of yourself? How much time went to God?

Is this where you want to be?

Now take your date book, your palm pilot and your checkbook and look through them again. Pray over the itemized figures, the appointments, the plans. Can you give these things over to God, to change as God sees fit?

No one does this perfectly. But God can give us the strength to trust him more, the strength to make concrete changes. If these things represent your life, what do they say? What can they say, by God's help, that would be more life giving?