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Romans 12:6-16
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THE PRIVILEGE OF GIVING

Some of you may be familiar with a magazine which has a rather snobbish title. It is called the Intellectual Digest. It has a relatively small circulation because it does not carry articles or photographs dealing with sex or violence. It is a "think" magazine which also limits its circulation, for the vast majority of men do not wish to think. Emerson said, "I despair of nothing if men will only think", which is itself a rather despairing thing to think about.

Several issues ago there appeared in Intellectual Digest an interview with Dr. John H. Knowles. Dr. Knowles will soon become the head of the prestigious Rockefeller Foundation. In the course of the interview Dr. Knowles made a significant statement which is worth thinking about. Said he, "One never hears of a poor man being called a philanthropist." He then related a recent incident out of his own experience:

"When I was coming to New York to be interviewed by the Rockefeller trustees a few months ago, it was a rainy day and my car slipped on the parkway and went into a mud puddle about 50 miles from New York. Well, about 100 Cadillacs--many of them probably being driven by doctors--passed me by. I could just see myself missing the meeting and everybody saying, 'There he is, unreliable John. Guess we didn't really want him anyway.' They were considering some 150 applicants, mind you. Then along came a bearded hippie in an old heap and he stopped and pushed me out of the mud puddle. Now there was a philanthropist, a true Good Samaritan. The young man even looked biblical. I thought it was beautiful, that kind of personal caring."

After reading that story I did what I often do--I turned to the second most important book in my study, the dictionary, and looked up the word "philanthropist". What do you think I found? You guessed it! A philanthropist is a person who practices philanthropy.

I must say I never find that kind of definition very satisfactory. But to shorten my story, I finally deduced that a philanthropist is a "lover of mankind, a benevolent friend of men, one devoted to human welfare." Certainly all of us must agree that such a person need not be, and often is not, a wealthy person. Jesus was a philanthropist in the highest and purest sense of the word, but he certainly had no great store of earthly possessions. Any one of us here this morning can be a philanthropist, even the poorest among us. All he needs is a great love and devotion toward his fellow human beings.

It is, of course, easy to misconstrue the words "love and devotion". They imply far more than a nice warm feeling inside of us. Remember the mason who was laying a new concrete driveway? A boy ran across it leaving his footprints and the mason let go with a loud and strong condemnation. A friend standing near said, "I thought you liked children." "I do," was the reply. "I like them in the abstract, but not in the concrete!"

Too often that is our difficulty. But it is not enough to love people in general and merely wish them well, not if one wants to be a philanthropist, certainly not if one wants to be a Christian. You must love men and women as Jesus loved them. You must care for them after the manner in which God cares for them. Love demands action, love demands giving of oneself, love often demands sacrifice. It is something more than an emotion and it is certainly more than "never having to say you're sorry"!

II

To be a Christian philanthropist then does not mean that you and I are under an obligation or responsibility to share and to care. What it means is that you and I are privileged to share and to care. As soon as you insert an obligation or a duty into philanthropy, you rob it of love and compassion and mercy. Philanthropy means we give because we care, we give because we love.

With all due deference to the fine spirit of so many church members, I must say that I never like to hear anyone talk about sacrificing in relation to his giving to a worthwhile benevolent project. A sacrifice is something that really hurts us. A sacrifice is giving up something we really need. It is foregoing a necessity, not a luxury. Jesus sacrificed. Peter and Paul sacrificed. Martin Luther sacrificed. Our Puritan forefathers sacrificed. Many Christians in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia have sacrificed. When we do what they have done, then we can talk about sacrifice. Giving of our plenty to help meet the needs of others is not a sacrifice; it is a real joy and privilege. We ought to thank God that we have so much we are able to give to and for others.

Nor does the Christian philanthropist ask, "What's in it for me? What will I get out of it?" To be sure, he always does get something out of it, but that is not why he gives. He gives out of love and compassion. He gives because he is grateful and appreciative for all his own blessings, and the consequence is that when he shares and cares he receives an additional blessing. He casts his bread upon the water and as surely as the moon waxes and wanes, so surely does it return to him.

I ask your forgiveness at this point for sharing with you a personal testimony. It is my own experience that the happiest people I have ever met have always been those who were most generous. There

is no other way to deep, rich happiness than through the success one has in making other lives richer and fuller and happier. Time after time I have discovered that I can't really give anything away. Does that sound queer? It's true. When I give something for a good cause I discover over and over again that I get something back, and I get back more than I ever gave. It may not come back in the same fashion in which I gave it, but come back it does. It has never failed. I believe it to be a law of life. There is no great living apart from great and generous giving. Every one of us can be a philanthropist, and every person who calls himself a Christian ought to be a philanthropist.

I have often wondered why there are so many jokes told about churches and ministers. This one, I heard the other day, for instance. A certain church desperately needed a new boiler. They decided on a special campaign to raise \$2,000 with which they would purchase a new one. After a month they had raised the sum total of \$85. They gave up the campaign because they decided that they were in enough hot water already!

Why are there so many stories of this nature? Is it not perhaps for the same reason that there are so many stories about wives and mothers-in-law? We tend to tell jokes about the things concerning which we have a little bit of guilt.

Why do some people spend so generously to meet their own comfort and convenience, and give so begrudgingly to those causes which will meet the vital needs of others? It is because their values are confused and they have never discovered the real privilege and the great joy that is to be found in giving.

George H. Lorimore gave us a thought we ought seriously to consider. Said he,

"It's good to have money and the things that money can buy, but it is good, too, to check up once in awhile and make sure that you haven't lost the things that money can't buy."

III

Let me share with you an amazing story. While swimming in a small lake in Scotland one day a young English boy was seized with cramps while some distance from the shore. His cries for help were heard by a young farm boy working in a nearby field. The farm boy plunged into the water and towed the drowning swimmer to the shore, saving his life. The English boy never forgot that incident. Some years later he went back to that Scottish farm and asked the boy what his ambition was. He got the reply that the young man wanted to study medicine. The English boy revealed that his family was ready to provide the needed money for that education. More years passed by

and the farm boy attended medical school, graduated with high honors, went into scientific research, and, in 1928 made a discovery that was to save uncounted millions of lives. His name was Dr. Alexander Fleming.

What about the boy whose life had been saved by Fleming? One winter he was struck down with pneumonia while on an important trip to the near east. His condition became serious. But back in England was a drug which had been invented by the one-time farm boy. It was sped by plane to the sick man's bedside and within a few hours the miracle producing penicillin had performed its mission. For the second time Alexander Fleming had saved the English boy's life. And who was that English boy? Sir Winston Churchill.(1)'Cast your bread upon the waters and after many days it shall return to you.'

The great theme of the New Testament and the heart of the religion of Jesus Christ is this: Give of yourself and your substance as God has given of Himself to you. The best use of life and its possessions is to use them for others. God Himself has promised that when we do this, great shall be our reward:

"Bring all the tithe into the storehouse and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the very windows of heaven and pour you out such a blessing that there shall not be room enough to receive it." (2)

Over 30 years ago I memorized this little poem with which I close:

"Go, break to the needy sweet charity's bread,
For giving is living," the angel said,
"And must I keep giving again and again?"
My peevish and selfish answer ran.
"Oh no," said the angel, piercing me through,
"Just give 'til our Father stops giving to you."

Amen.

(1) Wisconsin Masonic Journal, Dec. 1971

(2) Malachi 3:10