

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 29, 2020

Go with the Flow

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Several years ago I got an email advertisement with a simple but potentially expensive message: "Give Thanks. Start Shopping." The "Start Shopping" part was obviously a reference to Black Friday, which, as a single day, has now come and gone, but which, as the beginning of a season, is far from gone.

Like so many other parts of our lives, Black Friday was altered by the realities of COVID-19. Lots of people are shifting to online shopping rather than traveling to the store. It's less about you going to the merchant and more about the merchandise coming to you. Yet even under pandemic conditions, Black Friday still sets in motion a wave of commerce that can easily overwhelm us. All kinds of things now get swept up in the flow of spending and gift-giving, including Thanksgiving Day itself. Nowadays, Thanksgiving Day isn't just an opportunity to feast with family and friends. It's also a day to strategize, to prepare, to plan. A day to double check the sales ads. A day to narrow down your shopping list. A day to decide how early to set your alarm clock. A day to map out your route from store to store. Of course now the route has been greatly simplified: Get up. Go to couch. Sit on couch. Position laptop. Shop. With stores available online 24-7, it's now even harder not to go with the flow of holiday spending.

I'm not saying that we should just lock away our cash and toss our credit cards into the crackling holiday fire. There's nothing wrong with doing some spending and giving. I'm simply saying that we have to be on guard against getting swept along by the mounting pressure to get out there, or at least to log in, and be fully devoted consumers, ready to do whatever it takes to find the best deal and move the merchandise.

Actually, as people who have given ourselves to the Lord, we're already part of a great flow of giving. Not the kind that begins with markdowns in aisle ten, but the great flow of giving that begins with God himself. True, God is many things to us. God is Savior. God is Father. God is Ruler. God is Redeemer. God is Shepherd. God is Comforter. God is Sustainer. But remember that God is also fundamentally a giver. The God who called and formed his people Israel, the God revealed to us most fully in Jesus the Christ, is God the Giver.

That's a big part of what Thanksgiving is all about. Thanks is something we give to God in response to what God has given to us. He is the source of our life and our blessings. The very fact that the world exists, that you and I exist, is a solid sign that we are in relationship with a God who gives. His work of creating is itself a form of giving. He both makes us and provides for us. He, not we ourselves, is responsible for all that we are and all that we have. And that's because God, who is free to create or not, chooses to create, chooses to give.

In today's Scripture passage, Paul says that this God "who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness" (v. 10). "Harvest" is Paul's way of talking about how the Corinthians' financial gifts will benefit others. Remember that at this point in his letter, Paul is pushing his ongoing stewardship campaign. Not to fund the church budget or replace the broken

boiler, but to provide for the needs of impoverished Christians in the church in Jerusalem. Paul has been working on this collection for awhile now. At first, the Corinthians jumped at the opportunity to participate in the offering. They responded with desire and enthusiasm. But with time, their energy has waned and their generosity has virtually dried up. So Paul is trying to reignite some of their passion for this project. Basically, he wants them to finish what they had started.

One of the ways Paul tries to persuade the Corinthians to donate is by reminding them that God provides for them so that they can provide for others. In verse 8, after stressing how God "loves a cheerful giver," Paul tells the Corinthians, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." A couple of verses later, Paul says, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. . ." (v. 11). It's hard to tell whether Paul thinks that generous giving assures a material return for the giver. I certainly don't believe Paul is pushing a prosperity gospel, but he also doesn't rule out the possibility that if you're generous with what God gives you, don't be surprised that God provides more for you to give.

But one thing is for sure, and that is, God will provide for the needs of his people, for the sake of others. Whether you have just enough, or more than enough, God's purpose is that those resources flow through you, and beyond you, to others. That's why Paul uses the potent little phrase "so that" in our text. God will make grace abound to you *so that* you will abound in every good work. You will be made rich *so that* you can be generous. If "so that" weren't in the picture, then God's gifts could just stop right where they are, with us. They could flow from God to us, and go no further. They would be exclusively for our needs and our benefit.

But that's not how God wants things to work. That's not what God the Giver intends. God the Giver, who has made us in his image and aims to restore that image through Christ, intends for us to be givers, not just receivers. He doesn't just want us to flourish. He wants others to flourish. And one of the primary ways he accomplishes that purpose is by having his blessings pass through us on their way to others.

In his book *Free of Charge*, Miroslav Volf devotes a lot of time to exploring how God gives and how we should give. He stresses that God blesses us so that we would share with others. He puts it this way: "To the extent that we are channels of gifts, however, we can't just do with them as we please. They come to us with an ultimate name and address other than our own. Though in our hands, they are on their way elsewhere."¹

God has made us to be channels of his gift-giving. Now that doesn't mean that we shouldn't benefit from the gifts to the extent that we receive them. The gifts could be material needs, like food and shelter, or money to pay the bills. The gifts could be something less material, like ideas or skills or a particular passion. The gifts could be capacities, like physical health and strength. We can enjoy these gifts and draw upon them even as we're passing them on to others.

Pastor Charles Stanley says that one of his best Christmas memories came when he was five years old. That was when he got his first electric train set, which he kept until he finished college. Stanley said that when his son Andy was little, he couldn't wait to buy him his own train set. The moment arrived on Andy's fourth Christmas. As Charles assembled the set, he explained to Andy how the engine worked. They were putting the tracks together, and Andy said, "Daddy, did Santa Claus bring you this train or did he bring it to me?" So they both enjoyed it immensely, said Stanley.²

You see, here was a gift intended for Andy, but Charles was enjoying it just as much, or maybe more, and would eventually need to fully pass it on. Maybe you've had experience with one of those gifts that's meant for someone else, but you're so into it that you have trouble turning it loose and letting them take full possession. So it is with God's gifts. The main thing is that they didn't come from within ourselves, and aren't meant just for ourselves, but for others.

In today's Scripture passage, Paul wants the folks in the church at Corinth to remember that whatever their particular level of abundance, be it great or small, what they have has been given by God in Christ. And it's not all supposed to stay there with them. A lot of it is actually intended for their poor brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem. By not giving as they should, the Corinthians are actually holding up, or blocking, the flow of God's giving. Instead, they need to be what God intends them to be, channels through which his gifts flow on their way to Jerusalem.

Mark Tidd describes an experience he had while in college:

An old man showed up at the back door of the house we were renting. Opening the door a few inches, we saw his eyes were glassy and his furrowed face glistened with silver stubble. He clutched a wicker basket holding a few unappealing vegetables. He bid us good morning and offered his produce for sale. We were uneasy enough that we made a quick purchase to alleviate both our pity and our fear.

To our chagrin, he returned the next week, introducing himself as Mr. Roth, the man who lived in the shack down the road. As our fears subsided, we got close enough to realize it wasn't alcohol but cataracts that marbleized his eyes. On subsequent visits, he would shuffle in, wearing two mismatched right shoes, and pull out a harmonica. With glazed eyes set on a future glory, he'd puff out old gospel tunes between conversations about vegetables and religion.

On one visit, he exclaimed, "The Lord is so good! I came out of my shack this morning and found a bag full of shoes and clothing on my porch."

"That's wonderful, Mr. Roth!" we said. "We're happy for you"

"You know what's even more wonderful?" he asked. "Just yesterday I met some people that could really use them."³

Here was a man who had very little, yet saw what he had as abundance enough. Enough to take what he was given and pass it on to others.

Miroslav Volf says, "Things I am given are not just mine. Even if they are in my hands, some of them belong to my neighbors in need. I have an obligation to pass them on. If I block the flow of God's gifts, I haven't just failed the giving God; I've also failed the intended recipients. They have a right to the gifts, and I have an obligation to give."⁴

During this season when it's easy to get swept up in the flow of wanting more than what we really need, and giving to those who already have, may we go with the flow of God's giving, not hoarding for ourselves but being channels for the grace of God to reach its intended recipients. This will supply the needs of others and result in thanks and praise to God.

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 60.

² John Blake, "Two Preaching Giants and the 'Betrayal' That Tore Them Apart." CNN. November 19, 2012. Accessed November 21, 2012 < http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/17/us/andy-stanley/index.html?hpt=hp_c3>.

³ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 262.

⁴ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 60-61.