

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – October 27, 2019 – Abundance
Psalm 72:11-19 and 2 Corinthians 9:5-8**

For you. It's one of the most powerful phrases imaginable. Because it suggests a gift. Real. Sincere. No strings attached. I think about a child with wide eyes and an eager smile. "Yes," the grandparent says, "this ice cream is *for you.*" What could possibly be better?

We arrive in this world with nothing and, from an early age, we long for things that are just for us. It is a special feeling when someone thinks well enough of us to give us a gift. We treasure these things and we hope for more. But, it's not just children. No matter what our age, we are profoundly touched by gifts. This is one of the reasons why Christmas and birthdays are so special. We hear these words: "Here's something. A present wrapped. A gift. *For you.* Receive it. Open it. Enjoy it." The message and intention are powerful.

Call me cynical, if you will, but there is another use of this phrase. I would call it a misuse, really. It usually happens when we are considering a major purchase and a salesman draws alongside and says, "I have a deal *for you.*" Yes. There is surely something *for you* in all of this. A new car or a kitchen remodel, perhaps. Who

wouldn't like that? But there are also a lot of strings attached. And for many people, it's going to involve some debt. A monthly payment. A burden.

When we transition from childhood to adulthood, we leave the benefits of home behind. With one last hug, we step into a new reality where we quickly find ourselves in need of everything. Having ventured out on our own, many discover that it is a challenge to pay the bills. Debt looms large along with our stuff.

If marriage and children follow, then our possessions multiply. We know that we cannot take these things with us when we are gone, and we have a nagging feeling that most of our belongings will not make us any happier in the present either. Yet, curiously, many of us will choose to knock down old sheds and build bigger ones. Or we will trade one home for a larger one, along with more debt.

In many places, the accumulation of stuff is associated with affluence and status. In such a world, is it possible to simultaneously feel grateful for all we have while also recognizing that our possessions can be a burden? Because, at the end of the day, *we* are the ones who are responsible for all of this stuff. For cleaning it, and repairing it, and replacing it. Just imagine all that we could accomplish in life if we were not so busy attending to all of our things. Is it possible that a great number of our peers, and perhaps even we, ourselves, are rich in belongings but poor in heart?

As a minister, I have observed a certain wisdom that comes with age. In the latter phase of life, many people begin giving things away. They become more grounded and practical. They recognize that life has more to do with the company that we keep than with the earthly treasures we have surrounded ourselves with for years. Often, older people recognize that they do not need so much stuff, and they are generous to the benefit of others.

It is here that Paul, the author of Second Corinthians, calls us to consider our motivation for giving. He does so by contrasting cheerful giving “with reluctant and forced giving.”¹ He reminds us that “those who give out of self-interest” in order that they might “receive a reward here or hereafter are reluctant givers, for they act under an inner compulsion to seek their own good. There is no genuine joy, only a cool and calculating self-concern.”²

Cheerful givers, meanwhile, are those who recognize that “God graces. God sows. We do not deserve God’s favor, but we receive it. Such beneficence, especially

¹ Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 86.

² Best, 86.

when we know we do not deserve it, takes away some of our control of our lives and places us in a response mode. Grace received demands a response.”³

As Reformed Christians who proclaim that we are saved by grace through faith, Paul’s assumptions are jarring to our ears. For in his view, “good works are not an option for believers, but a necessity.” Surely, “believers are free to determine *what* form the good works will take, what shape love takes, but they are not free *not* to love; they are not free *not* to do good works.”⁴ Instead, “the grace that comes from God finds its fruition as it flows through us to others.”⁵

In the end, gifts don’t create burdens. They relieve them. This is what is so amazing about grace, and mercy, and forgiveness. They relieve the burden. They set us free. As J. Paul Sampley writes, “Giving is a delicate transaction. If you put even the tiniest little string on the gift, then it is not truly a gift.”⁶ “Giving and being responsive to others are best when they flow willingly and not grudgingly.”⁷ “If we start with the obligation, we will never understand the freedom. If we begin, instead, with the celebration of what and how much God has done for us and given to us, then the zeal for giving and for responding to others flows freely from us.”⁸

³ Sampley, 132.

⁴ Sampley, 130.

⁵ Sampley, 132.

⁶ Sampley, 132.

⁷ J. Paul Sampley, *2 Corinthians, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2000), 128.

⁸ Sampley, 128.

Today, I invite you to consider your own relationship with possessions. Your own life story. I invite you to consider how your life changed in those moments when you first realized that God's forgiveness through Christ is *for you*. No strings attached. Pure gift. How did you respond? With joy? Wonder? Surprise? Thanksgiving? And since that moment, how have you been transformed and renewed in the midst of both the dark valleys and lofty peaks of life? Friends, that story is worth telling. You shouldn't be the only one who knows it. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.