

Slide #1 - Introduction

June 30 & July 1, 2012
I WANT MY DOLLAR BACK!
2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Slide #2

Pastor David Russell, in Union City, Tennessee tells about little Nathan (**Click**) a three-year-old in his church. Nathan's parents were trying to introduce him to what it means to be in church so one Sunday they gave him a one-dollar bill that Nathan was to place in the offering plate. When the plate moved down Nathan's pew, his parents held it in front of him and told him to place the dollar in the plate. Nathan balked. Finally his mother gently took the dollar from him. She placed it in the plate, and it was passed on down the pew.

Suddenly the stillness of the offertory was shattered by a voice demanding, (**Click**) "I want my dollar back!" In Nathan's eyes, he had been robbed and he wanted everyone to know it. His parents tried in vain to quiet their son, but he was insistent, "I want my dollar back!" Everyone in the congregation was fighting a losing battle against laughter. Throughout the remaining strains of the organist's meditative tune, the only thing most worshippers heard was, "I want my dollar back!" Eventually, his parents gave Nathan another dollar to hold and he was content enough so that the congregation could go on with the rest of the service.

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With offering plates in hand, Pastor Russell says that as he stepped toward the altar to go on with the service, but he knew he needed to say something about what had just happened. Looking out at the smiling faces he said, (**Click**) "We probably shouldn't laugh because Nathan may have voiced what we may be feelings as well. Do we give to God from a sense of obligation or with a sense of gratitude? We may not want to say it out loud, but some of us maybe think, 'I want my dollar back!'"

You may wonder why we are talking about money at the beginning of July. We are not having a financial campaign. There is no special stewardship emphasis going on. It just so happens that today's text from the epistle of 2 Corinthians is about giving.

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I heard about one rural pastor who used a different approach. One Sunday he announced, "Now, before we pass the offering plate, I would like to request that the person who stole the chickens from Farmer Jones' henhouse please refrain from giving any money to the Lord today. The Lord doesn't want money from a thief!" The offering plate was passed around, and for the first time in months everybody gave. That approach might work, but stealing chickens is not a big problem around here.

None of these approaches to raising money quite fits me. It's not that I'm embarrassed to talk about money. Jesus, as you may know, talked more about money than any other one subject. He knew what money can do to people. And he knew the proper place of money in our lives.

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Money is important. We spend much of our life working for money. Some of us spend even more time worrying about money. It's always been so.

Some of you have had a difficult year. Lost jobs, declining home values, drained savings. It's hard. In a free market society, money ebbs and flows. Bubbles form and they burst. You may think this is a recent phenomenon. It is not.

Nearly three hundred years ago the great scientist, **(Click)** Sir Isaac Newton, lost money in a similar financial bubble. **(Click)** "I can calculate the motions of the heavenly bodies," Newton commented ruefully, "but not the madness of crowds." (3) He could have said, "The madness of the financial markets." Economists tell us that things are improving, but there are still many people in pain from the financial woes of the past five year. Not having money can bring us much pain. But, having too much money can also bring us much pain. For some people, money becomes their God. Nothing matters as much as holding on to their wealth.

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In the 1890s there was a Turkish professional wrestler named Yousouf who competed in Europe and the United States under the name **(Click)** "The Terrible Turk." He insisted he be paid for his matches in gold. Following his retirement, Yousouf headed back to Turkey with the gold he had won. On its second day at sea, however, the ship ran into a storm and started to sink. Yousouf jumped into the sea near a lifeboat, but the weight of the gold in his belt, estimated to be between \$8,000-10,000, pulled him downward and he drowned. **(Click)** It is normal to say that we possess money, but what a terrible things it is when money possesses us.

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St. Paul was writing to the church at Corinth. The church at Corinth was relatively well off, at least compared to some of the other churches that Paul had started. Some of these latter churches were struggling to survive. Some members of these churches were literally on the verge of starvation. Paul's message to the Corinthians was basically, "share the wealth!" **(Click)** He writes, "But since you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you--see that you also excel in this grace of giving." Further on he writes, **(Click)** "Our desire is not that others might be relieved

while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.”

You would think that the one place this message of equality would be acceptable would be in the church. After all, when the church first began, the members had all things in common. You would think that church people would say **(Click)** “Amen” to the idea of sharing resources. You would be wrong. I can hear some of the people at Corinth complaining, “Why should we help them? Nobody helped us when we were struggling.” That’s human nature--even in churches. St. Paul knows that and so he appeals not to their human nature but to the divine nature. **(Click)** He writes, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” Jesus had it all, but gave it all up for us who had nothing. That’s why....

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Giving is the Christian’s response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The first person to share the wealth was Christ. He shared the riches of God’s grace.

Whether it is giving to the local church or giving to foreign missions, or giving to United Way or giving to the homeless person on the street--there is one motivation for the Christian to give. Christ gave, first of all, to us.

(Click) Theologian Leonard Sweet speaks of four “rules” by which we live.

The first is what he calls **(Click)** The Iron rule—“Do to others **before** they do to you.” We know people who live by that rule. The second he calls **(Click)** The Silver rule—“Do to others **as** they do to you.” In other words, if someone does something good for you, do something for them in return. Some people live by this rule. It’s an okay rule, but it’s not the best yet. The third we know as **(Click)** The Golden rule which Jesus gave us—“Do to others **as you would have them** do to you.” This is a major step up from the Iron rule and the Silver rule. In other words, treat other people like you would like to be treated. However, to these Sweet adds what he calls **(Click)** The Titanium rule—“Do to others **as Jesus has done to you.**”

Jesus was the original giver. He gave to us the gift of salvation. Everything we give to his work or any act of charity is in response to his gift to us. Giving is the Christian’s response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

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Giving is also the Christian’s recognition of the proper place that money plays in our lives. **(Click)** Some people own money. **(Click)** Other times people are owned by their money. Money is their master rather than their servant. When we give to the work of God we are declaring our freedom from materialism. We serve God, not mammon.

(Click) The Rev. Bill Hayes tells a wonderful story about some college girls who were renting a house. One day an old man appeared at the back door that they were a little leery of. His eyes were glassy and his furrowed face glistened with silver stubble. They thought he was an alcoholic--and had no idea what else he might be. He clutched a wicker basket holding a few vegetables. He bid the girls a good morning and offered his produce for sale. They were uneasy about having what they thought was this old alcoholic at their doorstep and made a quick purchase to get rid of him.

To their chagrin, he returned the next day and introduced himself as Mr. Roth, a man who lived in the shack down the road. As their fears subsided, they got close enough to realize it wasn't alcohol but cataracts that marbled his eyes. On subsequent visits, he would shuffle in, wearing two mismatched right shoes, and share his philosophy about life.

On one visit, he exclaimed: **(Click)** "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!" the girls said, "We're happy for you." "You know what's even more wonderful?" he asked. "Just yesterday I met some people that could use those shoes and clothing." (4)

No wonder that old man was so happy. He owned his material goods, they didn't own him. The Bible doesn't say that money is the root of all evil. It says, of course, that the LOVE of money is the root of all evil. There are some things that only money can do--put food on the table and clothes on our back. Pay the mortgage and buy us fuel and medicine. But there are some things that money cannot do. What it can't do is buy us happiness or fulfillment or salvation. Giving is the Christian's response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Giving is also the Christian's recognition of the proper place of money in our lives.

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Mother Teresa once visited by a young couple who gave her a large amount of money. She asked them, "Where did you get so much money?" They answered, "We got married two days ago, but before our marriage, we had decided not to celebrate the wedding, not to buy wedding clothes, not to have a reception or a honeymoon. We wanted to give you the money we saved." Mother Teresa knew what such a decision meant, especially for a Hindu family in India. She asked them, "But how did you think of such a thing?" **(Click)** "We love each other so much," they answered, "that we wanted to share the joy of our love with you and those you serve." (5) This young couple understood better than most of us the place that money is supposed to occupy in our lives--we are to share it with those in need. It is in giving that we receive joy.

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But there is one thing more to be said: **giving is our declaration of faith in Jesus Christ**. We sometimes say something like, **(Click)** “I would give more to the church and to those in need, but I’m afraid that I won’t have enough to meet my own needs.” What does that say about your relationship to God? **(Click)** Do you trust God? Has God ever let you down? If you don’t have enough to meet your real needs, then of course by all means, do not give. But don’t refuse to give simply because you are **afraid**.

(Click) Frances Ridley Havergal was a young English woman, daughter of an Anglican pastor. She was chronically ill most of her life, and she was not a woman blessed with wonderful gifts of any kind. Yet she desired to give what she had back to Christ. She had a passion for missions. One day she determined that she really had no need of her jewelry. She packed it all up, saved a couple of pieces for sentimental value, and shipped the rest of it off to the Church Missionary Society, and asked them to sell the jewelry and use the proceeds for their work. **(Click)** Later she wrote to her friend. “I packed nearly fifty pieces of jewelry . . . I never packed a box with more pleasure.”

Frances Havergal didn’t say, “What if I need this jewelry some day to sell to pay my bills?” She could have. She wasn’t a wealthy woman. But she didn’t say that. She trusted God. Her simple desire was to give back to God in response to what God had given her. Of course, we don’t remember Frances Ridley Havergal because she gave her jewelry to church missions, but because of some verses she wrote about giving--words she meant from her heart. They went like this:

Take my life, and let it be Consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use; Every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it thine; It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is thine own; It shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour At thy feet its treasure-store.
Take myself, and I will be Ever, only, all for thee. (6)

Christian giving is our response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It also help us recognition of the proper place of money in our lives, and it is our declaration of our trust and faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.