

# Living Word Small Group Study Guide

October 11-17, 2020

## Sermon Series: A Method to Your Madness

### Week Three: "A Partnership"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

#### **Suggested Opening Prayer:**

*Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.*

*Almighty God, You, who are the source of life, strength, and ministry, it is in Your presence alone that we find help, hope, and life. Send us from this time of study to be a healing reminder of Your love to all whose lives we touch this day. We offer our prayers in the name of Christ. Amen.*

#### **Sermon Series Theme:**

The ministry of the church is all about helping you be what you were created to be. There are ways to make that happen on purpose. Methodists are all about purposeful process.

#### **This Week's Sermon Theme:**

Giving is your way of partnering with God's Kingdom work.

**Sunday Scripture Reading:** 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 (A group member should read the passage aloud).

#### **For Group Discussion:**

##### ***What does the text actually SAY?***

*The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.*

What does Paul say is the correlation between sowing and reaping? (9:6)

What should each person give? (9:7a)

With what attitude should each person give? (9:7b)

What attitude does God love when it comes to giving? (9:7c)

What is God able to give you in abundance? (9:8a)

What is the result of God giving you that in abundance? (9:8b)

### **What questions does the text raise for us?**

*The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Encourage participants to simply ask any questions they have about the passage. The questions below are only suggestions, representative of the kinds of questions that might be asked. The goal is not necessarily to provide answers, but to ask questions of the text! Open discussion about the questions raised below, or by the class, is encouraged.*

We might wonder if these statements about sowing and reaping are absolute laws, or ironclad promises.

When Paul says to give what we have decided in our hearts to give, we might ask, “wait a minute, what about tithing?”

We might ask, should I really give nothing rather than give reluctantly, or because I feel compelled to, or like I really *ought* to?

We might ask, if God loves a cheerful giver, what does that imply about how God feels about others? Does He *not* love them, too?

We might wonder what Paul is really saying here about the role of God’s grace in our giving.

We might wonder why Paul says that we will have all that we need, in all things, and at all times. Is that seriously possible?

Finally, we might wonder about the relationship between the abundance of God’s grace and the abundance of our own good works. How are they connected?

### **Commentary on the text:**

*The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.*

See also: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:5; Proverbs 22:8-9; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Romans 13:10; 2 Corinthians 8:2

This week’s reading comes from the letter we know as 2 Corinthians, one of many correspondences that took place between the apostle Paul and the church in Corinth. Before diving into the beginning of this week’s passage, though, it will be a good idea to take a look at a long section of the letter leading up to it, which helps to set the context. In 2 Corinthians 8:1, up through 9:5, Paul has been encouraging the Corinthians to follow through on completing a gift to help the struggling Christian church in Jerusalem, that they had begun during the prior year. In 8:10, he commends the Corinthians for being not only the first to give to this cause, but the first to even express a desire to help. Apparently, Paul has successfully boasted to others, in Macedonia, about the magnitude of the Corinthian gift, as a way to encourage the Macedonians to give as well. For whatever reason, however, the Corinthian church seems to have abandoned the cause. Paul is now urging them not to cause him, or themselves, embarrassment by a lack of follow-through. In fact, the culmination of this entire section of the letter consists of Paul letting them know, in 9:5, that he is sending an advance party to help with the collection so it is completed before Paul himself arrives. The purpose of this group is to avoid a potentially uncomfortable, and embarrassing situation for everyone involved if Paul were to arrive in Corinth with the Macedonians, to find the Corinthians were *not* actually ready to present their gift. Paul is not trying to strong-arm the Corinthian church into giving, but rather, trying to help them “save face” in front of the Macedonians.

All of which leads us to this week's Scripture passage. Paul begins with a proverb-like statement – "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously," a phrase often shortened to "you reap what you sow" (see Proverbs 22:8-9 for a similar Old Testament proverb). The actual structure of the Greek sentence is somewhat more poetic than most English translations render this proverb, though. More literally, it is "Whoever sows sparingly, sparingly will reap, and whoever sows generously, generously will reap." Even though Corinth was a fairly large metropolis of ancient Greece, it was still an agriculturally based economy, such that Paul's words would have been quickly understood by his readers. The point, of course, is that generosity towards others produces a bountiful outcome for the giver, as well, just as the farmer can only receive a crop proportional to the amount of seed that has been sown.

In verse 7, Paul begins to individualize the invitation to generous giving. "Each should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion." The act of giving Paul is requesting from the Corinthian church as a whole must consist of individual decisions to give on the part of its members. This is in direct continuity with what Paul had written in one of his earlier letters to the church at Corinth, where Paul had written them "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made" (1 Corinthians 16:2). What Paul seems to expect is careful discernment and thought on the part of the giver with regard to how much they, as individuals, can give in support of the cause the church as a whole has committed to.

We may wonder here, though – how does Paul expect these individual Christians to decide how much to give? The only specific guidance Paul gives is that the gift should be "what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion." Obviously, to *compel* someone to give a certain amount would result in that person's *reluctant* giving, and that is something Paul wants to avoid. But why does Paul want to avoid, for example, mandating a tithe? The theological reason for this is that Paul believes, and believes wholeheartedly, in his doctrine of God's grace. Because God freely, and generously imparts grace to believers, true believers will likewise reciprocate that grace freely, generously, and voluntarily. For Paul, to impose a legalistic mandate on this act of giving would be to deny the opportunity for Holy Spirit-driven generosity. Paul simply asks for the Corinthians to "sow generously," in expectation of a grace-filled response. Paul's concluding words "for God loves a cheerful giver" reinforce this sentiment – what pleases God most are human actions that reflect God's own grace-filled giving.

So, does this mean Christians do not need to tithe? To be honest, the question reflects a failure to grasp the full meaning of Paul's words, and the full extent of God's grace. Paul wants our giving to come from the heart, by grace, as a response to *God's* grace, and not to be done as a "good work" or merely in reluctant obedience to a law. Paul expects a Holy Spirit-filled people to give abundantly, bountifully, and generously, without the need to make it a "law" or "mandate," since, according to Romans 13:10, "love is the fulfillment of the law." Paul insists that love supersedes the law – including the law on tithing – and love does not need to measure itself against a standard. Rather, true love will meet, and even exceed, the standards previously defined by the law. Still, many Christians have found that having a standard of giving helps them to stay disciplined in their faith, and to avoid even temporary temptations to withhold our "love." Again, the key for Paul is that the grace of God can only be responded to in our own freedom, and with our own grace. While the level of giving is not mandated, when we "give what we have decided in our hearts to give," the level of our giving becomes a measure of our heart-transformation.

Now that Paul has encouraged the Corinthians toward Spirit-driven generosity, he now, in verse 8, tries to ease any fears they may have that their abundant generosity might leave *themselves* impoverished. Paul reassures them that God's grace is so powerful, God's grace is so abundant, that their every need can be met. God does not give so as to barely meet our need, but God's grace "abounds," "overflows." But as great as this promise might be for the individual giver, Paul reminds them that this is so that they, in turn, might overflow in good works. The picture is of one cup, overflowing into another, which then overflows into another. God's grace is given so abundantly, it flows into us until we are full, so that it overflows from us into others. God's grace does not stop at giving us only what we need – God's grace continues to flow, giving us the opportunity to be freely and willingly generous toward others. There may be, perhaps, no greater sign of the power of God's grace to change lives than in the transformation of someone previously unwilling to share their financial blessings with others into someone who is openhandedly generous toward those in need. It is worth noting that this is exactly what Paul had already seen happen in the churches in Macedonia. In 2 Corinthians 8:2-3, Paul had written of them: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability." Paul encourages the church in Corinth to do the same, and for two thousand years, the church has read in this passage an encouragement for us to do the same as well.

### **Final Thoughts for Discussion:**

*The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.*

How have you typically related to the proverb "you reap what you sow"? As a warning, like bad karma, that doing bad things will lead to bad things happening in your life? Or as a promise that if you are generous toward others, generosity will be returned to you?

How do you, personally, "decide in your heart" how much to give?

Do you ever feel like you are giving reluctantly or under compulsion? What would this text say to you about that?

Conversely, do you feel like you actually give "cheerfully"?

Do you find a defined standard of giving, like the tithe, helpful in giving you a way to be disciplined in giving, or does it only serve to create anxiety or guilt if you do not meet it?

How are your own blessings overflowing to others?

What most motivates your giving? Is it an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the grace you have received from God, including salvation in Jesus Christ? Is it a strong passion to see God's mission to be accomplished on earth? Is it a deep compassion for those less fortunate than you? Or is it merely an obligation or duty you feel you must participate in to "be a good Christian"? What would Paul say should motivate your giving?

### **Suggested Closing Prayer:**

*Generous and merciful God, we give thanks for the blessings we have received. Help us to respond to Your generosity toward us with our own generosity toward others. Help us to discern the level of our own giving, not according to law, but according to the transformation of our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*