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2nd Corinthians 9:6–9, ESV

⁶The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹As it is written,

*“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”*

Matthew 6:1–4, ESV

***6** “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*

²“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Luke 6:29–31, ESV

³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

Leverage.

When I was growing up, my father managed the sales side of a garage and tire shop. The manager of the workshop, where brakes were replaced, tires were

mounted, and mufflers were replaced was a man named John. He was a big guy, an African American man, and a close friend of my father's. We called him Uncle John. I used to hang around my father's shop on occasion, and once, I was standing just inside the door that led from the sales area into the workshop watching Uncle John work on a car. The hood was up, and I saw him lift up what seemed to me to be an absolutely huge tool, maybe three or four feet long. He glanced over, saw my eyes widen, and smiled. He asked me if I knew what the tool was. I was about ten and shook my head no. Then he said it was a torque wrench. He motioned me over. He said that the wrench was used to tighten bolts to a precise "torque" or strength, he said. He said that he had just changed something called a head gasket and that he was about to put the head back on the car. In order for the head to not be bent, the torque on all the bolts had to be the same, that is, all of the bolts had to be at exactly the same amount of tightness, and that's what a torque wrench did, it measured the exact tightness of a bolt. Then I asked him why the wrench was so long. He said that it had to do with something called "leverage". He said the longer the wrench, the easier it is to turn the bolt, and since he was getting to be an older guy, he liked using a wrench to which he didn't have to apply too much force. It took him a while, but he got me to understand that he would have to work harder to tighten the bolts

with a shorter handle than with a wrench with a longer handle. Now, Uncle John did three things that day, at least for me. 1, he taught me about torque wrenches. 2, he taught me about leverage. And 3, he brightened up my day by being a very good man and giving me a little of his time. He also gave me the idea for this sermon, many, many years after this incident. But it has nothing to do with the torque wrench or changing the head gasket of a car. I'll get back to this story.

Normally, I provide an overview of the books of the Bible that we have quotes from. But since we have talked extensively about Corinthians, Matthew, and Luke in the past, I will only say that Matthew's Gospel was not written first, and that it probably drew upon Mark's Gospel, and that Matthew's was written for Jews who were followers of Christ. Luke's Gospel also drew on Mark's Gospel most likely, and the author was probably not a Jew, unlike the authors of the other three Gospels. Luke was writing to all people, including gentiles. The letters to the Christians in Corinth were written by Paul; the city was about fifty miles west of Athens in Greece, and its remains exist today. The letters to the Corinthians detail the basic tenants of being a Christian.

Our three passages today all have to do with giving. They present three perspectives on giving. Giving is of course an important aspect of our faith. The first passage, from 2nd Corinthians, can be best summarized by this one, short sentence: *God loves a cheerful giver*. We don't give out of duty only. We don't give grudgingly, out of some fear that if we don't give, we will spend eternity with a guy named Satan in a very uncomfortable locale. We are cheerful when we give. It feels good to do something for others. It lifts us up, energizes us, fills us with a warmth. It's a blessing. We're thankful that our faith demands that we give, because once we start doing it, we walk through life as if we were walking on air. That's why God loves a cheerful giver – because it's the most natural kind of giver, and God wants us to just be ourselves.

The second passage, from Matthew's Gospel can be summarized with a longer sentence. It's one that is very frequently quoted: *when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others*. In other words, Christians are not giving so that others will think highly of them. We are, in a sense, being selfish, because we give simply so that we can be ourselves, so that we can feel good, so that we can be close to God. We don't stress ourselves out by hustling to get other people to think good things about us. You know, one of the biggest

lessons we typically have to learn in life is that you can't control what other people say and do, and when you try, you often feel frustrated and anxious. It's better to just model a good Christian way of living, hoping that it will rub off on others, and to live for God and for God's people.

The third passage, from Luke's Gospel, says the following: *Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.* This one is a bit subtle. It says two things. First, if someone you encounter asks for aid, give what you can. Second, if someone steals from you, let them keep what they have taken. Maybe they need it more than you do. Maybe you will touch their hearts and they will be filled with God's grace when they realize that you care more for them than you do for your stuff or for vengeance. This is part of Jesus' so-called Sermon on the Plain, a variation of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and we've talked about this before. As such, this is a very important, core teaching of Christ. In fact, our second quote, from Matthew, is part of the sermon on the Mount, and so we see the overwhelmingly critical need for a Christian to be a giving person.

To sum it up, Christians should give happily, give privately, and give to anyone who comes to you in need, even if they take without asking. It sounds like

a gigantic order. But I'd like to get back to the man I knew as Uncle John. He did more than work on cars and treat little kids nicely. When he wasn't working, he was serving people through his church. He would borrow the shop's pickup truck, then collect used appliances from people in his church and from other churches. He would then take these refrigerators, washers, driers, ovens, etc., to the shop and fix them there. Once he got them working - and he always paid for the parts himself - he would drive them to the homes of people who needed appliances but couldn't pay for them. He, like my dad, worked six days a week. Sunday morning was spent at church, the evenings were often spent in the shop repairing appliances, and Sunday afternoon was spent delivering these appliances.

Once, he took me on a Sunday afternoon run. He loaded the truck up with the help of his sons, and then I climbed inside the cab next to him. One of his sons rode in the back of the truck to help unload appliances. I was too young to be of any real help, but my father was very much in favor of me accepting the invitation to join him, when Uncle John asked me if I could like to come along. My most vivid memory is the business-like way he did the job. People were so thankful for the gift of an appliance. But he didn't wallow in glory. He just smiled, shook a hand, and said that he was happy to do it, and that he got as much out of it as they did. I believe that covers two of our quotes, he gave cheerfully, and he

wasn't looking for glory. What about number three, giving to anyone who asks and letting people keep what they steal? Well, I never knew him to turn away someone who asked for an appliance.

What about folks who take without asking? That very day, after I watched him and his son install a washer, we went back to the truck to discover that a refrigerator had just been stolen off the back of the truck. I remember John's son saying something like hell, somebody just carried away a full-sized refrigerator? Uncle John said that's okay, it's one that we don't have to carry inside ourselves. Whoever took it will do that for us. And as far as the people who were supposed to get that refrigerator, well, he knew he could quickly find and fix up another one. Everything would be fine. I think that's number three: if they steal, let them have it.

Uncle John is long dead. I am quite confident I know where he is right now. Here's something interesting. Some number of years later, when I was in graduate school, the head gasket on my car failed while I was driving into USC from my apartment fourteen miles away. I ended up replacing the head gasket right there in the garage. There happens to be another story associated with this incident, and someday I'll talk about it in a sermon. But all I want to say about

this today is that I of course knew that I needed a torque wrench, so that when I put the head back on the engine, I wouldn't warp it by tightening the bolts at different torques. Luckily, another grad student, a buddy of mine, had one and he lived nearby. He drove to his apartment and came back with it. It was huge, just like the one Uncle John had used so many years before. Interestingly, what would have been a nasty job that I really had no time for – replacing a head gasket in the parking structure at USC – turned into a pleasant experience, because the entire time I thought about that man who so long before had taught me about leverage.

Leverage. That's the thing about Christian giving. It's a way to leverage what we are as believers. When we give to others, it not only helps that person. It not only lifts us up. But also, it's a simple, easy way to teach others about the beauty of our faith. It can be very hard to teach someone about Christianity and why it's such a good thing. It's like tightening bolts with a short wrench. You have to work very hard at it. But if you use a longer wrench, if you demonstrate Christian values by giving to whomever needs it, by giving joyously, by giving to whomever asks or even if they take without asking, you can leverage the act of giving to perhaps plant the seed of faith in someone else.

This church, by the way, has a very active food bank. They serve an enormous number of families compared to the size of this congregation. This church gives in other ways, like warm clothing and school supplies. I want to underscore how critical this is to us being an effective church, to the members of this congregation spreading the faith. Please pray with me.

God, we know that we should give cheerfully, that we should give without looking for congratulations or praise or honor, that we should give to whomever needs help, and that we should consider letting people have things even if they don't ask. But there is one more thing about giving that we would like you to plant in our hearts. Please let us always remember that giving will make it much, much easier to accept help, to take what is offered, to ask for help when we need it. Because if we are givers, we will know how blessed it is to let others have that opportunity to give. God, let us be givers and let us always be willing to reach out for help when we need it. Amen.