

A Prayer to Dedicate Food (and Harvest Gifts)

Generous God,
as once you multiplied the five loaves and two fishes,
multiply the gifts each of us brings,
that from our sharing together, blessings may flow.¹

[2 Corinthians 9:6-15](#)

Today, the world stands on the brink of unprecedented famines. About 30 million people are experiencing alarming hunger, severe levels of food insecurity and malnutrition in north-eastern Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen. 10 million of them are facing emergency and famine conditions. Famine is already likely happening in parts of northern Nigeria, while Yemen and Somalia are on the brink. Thanks to aid efforts, it has been pushed back in South Sudan but the food crisis continues to spread across the country.

These are just four of the many countries that are facing high levels of food insecurity this year. In Malawi, Sudan, Afghanistan, DRC or Syria millions of people do not have enough food to feed their families. The situation in some of these countries could worsen if the international community do not address urgent needs and resolve the root causes.

That's a [quote from Oxfam's website](#). Famine has not gone away.

And as the food bank shows us, there are individuals and families in 'food poverty'. Here's [one quote from the Trussell Trust's website](#). It comes from a sixteen-year-old lad called Josh, who has no family to support him:

I was starving for about a week. I didn't have any food and had really bad anxiety, but it came to the point where I had to ask for help from the food bank.

All this makes our reading from 2 Corinthians relevant. It isn't a general passage about Christian giving. Its context is that a famine has hit Jerusalem, and Paul is organising a collection from the Gentile churches to help the Christians in Jerusalem.

So as well as the conventional use of this passage in helping us understand Christian giving, I hope we find it connects especially with our giving to the needy that we especially remember at Harvest Festival.

What does he teach us about motivation for Christian giving, especially to the poor?

The **first** motivation is *joy*.

⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

No heavy guilt trips being inflicted by a preacher here to get people to give, no manipulation, but rather a free decision based on joy: 'God loves a cheerful giver.'

Now whenever I come across those words 'God loves a cheerful giver' I cannot resist quoting the American Baptist preacher Tony Campolo, who pointed out that the Greek word translated 'cheerful' in English is 'hilaros'. You will not be surprised to know that it is the word from which our English 'hilarious' derives.

And so Campolo was rather taken with the idea of being not simply a cheerful giver, but an hilarious giver. He told the story of how he would go up to the toll booth on a toll road and give the attendant twice the amount needed.

'This is for me and for my friend in the car behind,' he would say.

But he didn't know the person in the car behind, and so he drove off, observing with great – yes – hilarity as the toll booth attendant tried to explain to the motorist in the next car what had happened.

I guess it's a prank, but it's a positive prank!

The deep and profound joy for the Christian in giving is knowing that in doing so we are making a difference for the kingdom of God. Assuming the Corinthians responded to Paul's appeal, they would have had the joy of helping their brother and sister Christians in need.

I discovered this once when I went from merely reading newsletters and prayer letters from one prominent Christian charity to becoming a regular supporter of them. Now, when I read of their amazing work around the world, I get a kick from realising that my small standing order is helping to make a difference among the world's poor.

So I want us to enjoy our giving at this Harvest Festival. Enjoy it, because you know that obeying the will of God you are making a difference for good – a kingdom of God difference. Don't brag, but rejoice!

The **second** motivation to which I want to draw your attention is **grace**.

¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you,
because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

As I said in the first point, Paul doesn't use guilt and manipulation to get the Corinthians to give. It would go against his core beliefs about the Gospel to do so. Here are no attempts to tug at the heartstrings. He doesn't give them an emotional account of the desperate straits that the Jerusalem Christians are in. There is no projected number of likely deaths in our text. Paul doesn't come on heavily by telling the Corinthians that they will be failing God if they don't give generously.

No, there's none of that. He assumes that generous giving will be a sign that the grace of God is at work in the givers. When we truly know that God is a God of grace, it affects us deeply. To realise that God has not just been merciful to us in forgiving us our sins, but that he has positively lavished his love on us, and gives us so many good things that we do not deserve, not least his very presence in our lives, then what kind of people do we become?

Surely the answer is that graced people become grateful people. And those who have received grace find themselves motivated to offer grace. (Incidentally, that's why forgiving and being forgiven go together.)

And we don't simply respond in gratitude to God, we want others to experience a sign of grace, so we pay it forward and bless others because we have been blessed.

A well-known Anglican vicar named Robert Warren used to be in charge of a large church in Sheffield called St Thomas', Crookes. The numbers grew, and it became influential across the entire city. Therefore you won't be surprised to know that they needed all sorts of ambitious building projects, and this required fundraising.

Warren once said that if you needed people to give, you needed to give more grace to them first. Not for him the guilt trips: he reminded people of just how immensely gracious God had been to them in Christ.

So I'm not putting up emotive photos of starving children today. I just want you to know that God loves each one of us, sinners that we are, that he forgives us through Jesus Christ, makes us new, and pours his very presence into our lives.

Doesn't that make us want to give out of gratitude?

The third motivation is behind all I've said already. The third motivation is ***Jesus***,

¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Jesus is God's indescribable gift. We run out of words to describe how wonderful he is. Even Paul was lost for words at this point about Jesus – that's why he's 'indescribable'. You can't limit your value of God's gift of Jesus to the world.

Yes, let us look at God's giving before we look at our own. God gave up his only begotten Son to transform the world. How do you measure that? What adjectives do you use – or even invent to come to terms with that kind of giving?

God has transformed the world by his own giving. As Jesus came to dwell among us and ultimately die for our sins, everything changed.

It was God's giving of his 'indescribable gift' that changed the world.

Giving changes things, and God has led by example. A giving God begets a giving people. For not only do we give praise to God for his giving, he shapes us to be more like himself.

I know of course that we can never out-give God, but the generosity of his own giving of Jesus, and Jesus' own giving to the point of emptying himself is what he calls us to emulate.

For his extraordinary giving has changed us for the better, and his giving continues to change us.

So how might our giving make a kingdom of God change in the lives of others?

Prayer of Thanksgiving

A thousand thanks to you,

O King of the universe.

A thousand thanks to you,

O Lord of grace,
for what you have given us since our birth,
and for what you will give us
until the day of our death.²

Prayer of Intercession

We pray for those
whose tasks are backbreaking,
whose bodies are mutilated
or whose spirits are crushed.
Give us the will
to share our bread with the hungry,
to give shelter to those who feel rejected,
and to reach out to those in need.³

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing

Bless you, Creator of all we eat.
Bless you, Saviour – you with us meet.
Bless you, Spirit who makes this sweet.⁴

¹ Ray Simpson, *His Complete Celtic Prayers*, #1266.

² *Ibid.*, #1278.

³ *Ibid.*, #995.

⁴ *Ibid.*, #1272.