

Dear Friends,

Recently I received a letter from someone I didn't know asking me for several hundred pounds. Believe it or not I did respond by paying the full amount that I was asked for. Why did I do that? I did it for one very good reason. The envelope that I received said on it "HM Revenue and Customs", it came from the tax office. I didn't know the person at all but he had the authority to ask for the money. I didn't really have a choice about how to respond to the request, I had to give the money whether I wanted to or not.

There can be different reasons for giving and that's what I wish to reflect on. There's plenty in the bible about giving, there are famous words like the saying "It is better to give than to receive". In the Old Testament we see evidence of the command approach. The Israelites were aware that they owed everything to God. They were commanded to show their gratitude by offering a tenth of their harvest to God. They didn't really have much choice, it was an order, it was the law.

Sometimes we are commanded to give, the most obvious example being taxation. When we get a tax demand we have to pay it, we don't get the choice. Occasionally we may disagree with the amount we've had deducted and if we've got a case the figures will be adjusted. But that doesn't alter the fact that we have to pay taxes, it's the law of the land. That does mean that we often tend to give rather grudgingly, there aren't many of us who can really say we enjoy paying taxes. We know the revenue is needed to run the country. We know that much of what is raised is used in very important work, in running the health service, in education and other vital parts of our national life. We still tend to give grudgingly because we don't have any choice.

Things are rather different in 2 Corinthians 8. Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to contribute to his collection for the church in Jerusalem which was in great need. He pointed to the example of others, he talks particularly about the Macedonians and all they were doing. The Macedonians gave quite freely and voluntarily. Paul didn't even ask them for a contribution, he knew that they faced all sorts of problems, he knew that they were very hard up. Paul didn't dare ask them for anything, but they insisted on doing their bit. They had heard about the need in Jerusalem and they wanted to respond, they wanted to do something to help. Walt Whitman said "When I give, I give myself" and that's what we see here.

So we see here that the Macedonians gave voluntarily, without any pressure being applied and without even being asked. They also gave sacrificially as they didn't have much in material terms. They also gave joyfully, this wasn't a grudging contribution. We're told that their joy was great. Paul saw this as clear evidence that God was at work among them.

When we think about giving we need to put it in context. All that we have and all that we are comes from God. So when we talk about giving we're not just talking about what we put in the collection plate, it's much broader than that. It's about how we use our time, it's about how we use our talents and abilities as well as financial considerations.

With best wishes,

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