

The Secret to Sharing

God's Word has much to say about alleviating poverty and managing wealth. But are you participating in God's plan to provide for others through you?

The skinny college dropout who founded Apple computers was born to unwed parents and then adopted by a blue-collar family. Steve Jobs later told an interviewer that his goal in life was "not to be the richest man in the cemetery but to leave the world a better place than he found it." Fellow high-tech billionaire Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, made that goal a reality by donating a fortune to "take on some tough problems: extreme poverty and poor health in developing countries." Billionaires like Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and the late Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, understood this timeless truth: If you want to live, then give!

Jesus showed His own generosity again and again throughout His ministry by offering His time and resources to help the needy. He clearly held possessions lightly, and He instructed His disciples to do the same: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Luke 12:33-34, NIV).

A life of sharing will not guarantee you to be the richest person in the cemetery, but it does guarantee you can live a fulfilled and meaningful life and one day die rich through depositing treasures in heaven.

Sharing is the only solution to bridging the widening gap between the rich and the poor. In his book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Ron Sider reminds us of our real situation: "The poorest 20 percent of the people (just over one billion) own 1 percent of the world's wealth. ... The richest 20 percent

own 81 percent.” By sharing, we can rescue our brothers and sisters from injustice, teach them to fish and show them where to find the pond of opportunity. An African leader told me once that creating opportunity is making sure the ladder reaches all the way down to the poorest of the poor.

We Share an Island

In the film *Cast Away*, Tom Hanks plays Chuck, a FedEx employee whose cargo plane crashes near a deserted island in the South Pacific. Chuck soon realizes he has been given up as lost and must find a way to fend for himself in his sometimes hostile environment. He is hungry and lonely but not willing to give up.

Then he receives a wonderful boon when several of the FedEx packages he was carrying on the plane wash up on shore. These packages contain various items he is able to use to survive, and he eventually concocts a way to escape from the island.

As I watched the film, the thought occurred to me: If I were marooned on a deserted island with other castaways and blessed with the resources to survive, would I share them with others so they could live too? I think all of us, whether followers of Jesus or not, would most certainly do so.

What’s my point? We *do* live on an island; it’s a global island called Earth. And we share this island with 7 billion other inhabitants. Nearly 4 billion of them live on less than \$2 a day. In America, almost 1.7 million American households fall below this poverty level—affecting more than 3.5 million children.

The apostle Paul spoke about this socio-economic gap and its remedy: “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality” (2 Cor. 8:13-14).

Sharing Is Biblical

It must be underscored that Paul's call for equality is not a call for socialism, where the government becomes Robin Hood by overtaxing the rich to level the economic playing field so everyone has the same balance in their checking accounts. Neither is Paul stoking the fire for class warfare. He is not condemning the rich as though their wealth is the cause of poverty.

Paul is in no way saying that because you drive a luxury car, the poor drive a clunker or that because you live in a nice home, others are imprisoned in a fleabag shack. In truth, the Bible offers many examples of God blessing people with wealth, from Abraham to King David, and it even relishes the splendor of Solomon's vast wealth. Jesus didn't condemn the rich because of their riches, either. Instead, He confronted the rich young ruler because he loved his status and his wealth more than God's eternal priorities.

From a biblical perspective, wealth is one of the many gifts from heaven's treasure chest the Lord hopes to use to accomplish His master plan. One potential major donor to our organization told me, "I could lose all of this money tomorrow, and it would not matter." I replied, "God has blessed you with your wealth. It's not a question of losing it; it's a question of how you are going to use it."

All God's children deserve a chance—an opportunity to have their basic needs met and to be able to improve their conditions by responsible labor. Some banish the principle of equality of opportunity because they claim it's a liberal social agenda. They fail to realize that it's actually a biblical mandate first introduced to the people of Israel when they settled in the Promised Land: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your

God" (Lev. 23:22).

Yes, it's that simple! We all have a harvest field that represents our time, talent and resources. Your field might be small in comparison to others, but the principle remains the same: We are to devote the first fruits, or the first 10 percent of our income, as a tithe to our local church, just as the people of Israel were instructed that no grain was to be harvested until the first-fruits offering was brought to the Lord (Lev. 23:14). Then, in addition to their first-fruits offering, they were to allocate a corner of their fields for the poor.

This was and is God's profit-sharing plan for meeting the needs of the local church and caring for the poor. I like to call it "God's stimulus plan for sharers." He enlarges our harvest fields and our capacity to give even more.

How to Become Rich by Sharing

By now I hope you are asking, "How can I become rich by creating equality of opportunity for others?" The answer is found in a tiny but power-packed three-letter word: *sow*. In the Bible, 2 Corinthians 9 is the *sow* chapter. These verses hold the keys to unlocking untold riches. In sharing, you are *strategic, obedient* and on your way.

1. Sharing is *strategic*. By sharing our time, expertise and resources, lives can be saved and improved. Take the example of Paul, who started a relief program to help the Jerusalem church alleviate poverty in their city. To fund the initiative, Paul traveled throughout Asia Minor asking Christians to donate funds to feed the hungry. In Romans 15:26, he states, "For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem," but the actual list of contributing churches is much longer. The list in Luke's account includes delegates from Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe and Asia.

As a result of Paul's journeys to help the suffering, churches were planted in Asia Minor, and the gospel spread throughout the world. The only way most people in the world will discover the good news of Jesus' love is when they see it demonstrated by the offer of a cup of water to the thirsty or a piece of bread for the hungry. Mother Teresa put it this way: "Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile."

2. Sharing is obedient. Paul declared there would be eternal results from sharing: "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God ..." (2 Cor. 9:13). But sowing is a verb and requires actions of obedience. That same verse continues, "... others will praise God *for the obedience* that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ" (emphasis added).

How is sharing an act of obedience? First, it's the mark of a true follower of Christ. The apostle John wondered if people who failed to be generous had experienced God's love in their hearts: "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?" (1 John 3:17).

But it should also be guilt-free, as Paul says: "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 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" (2 Cor. 9:6-7).

3. Sharing is the way to breakthroughs and blessings. If I tithe 10 percent to my local church, then I only have 90 percent left to pay my bills. And if I give another 10 percent to help the poor, then there is only 80 percent remaining. After paying taxes to Uncle Sam, I worry about slipping into poverty myself!

God's economy doesn't make sense in light of our human understanding of economics, and if you base your life on the world's view of money, you will miss God's blessing every time. Here is God's economics: "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (2 Cor. 9:10-11).

You may question my mathematical calculations when I say this, but just hear me out. If you faithfully tithe the first 10 percent of your income to your local church and then leave a corner of your field for the poor, God will keep replenishing the seed. He will also enlarge your harvest field so the remaining 80 percent will exceed the 100 percent.

It's a Reciprocal Process

Ultimately, sharing requires responsibility for the giver and receiver. If not offered wisely, sharing can be counterproductive to the long-term good of the receiver. Irresponsible compassion can have a negative effect on how the poor assess their personal value and place in society.

As mentioned earlier, in Bible times, land owners were not to harvest the corners of their fields but rather to leave the grain for the poor. The grain wasn't handed to the poor; they had to take the initiative to meet their own needs. God could've commanded that a portion of the harvest be *given* to the poor, but instead He provided those in need with a way to work toward meeting their own needs and experiencing the dignity that comes with labor.

Long-term irresponsible sharing—whether practiced by the government or the church—will breed a welfare mentality that erodes the self-worth of those who are supposedly being

helped. Their incentive slackens, their dreams die and survival becomes their only goal in life. As Robert Lupton says, "When society subsidizes you for being noncontributory, it has added insult to your already injured self-esteem."

That said, this must not become an excuse for not reaching out and helping the poor. As one philosopher said, "Seldom resist an impulse to do something kind." I believe there is a place for no-strings-attached sharing, where you bless someone even if the help is unappreciated or wrongly used. There are times when I've given money to a person pleading for bus fare who squandered it on smokes, a six-pack or a lottery ticket. At some outreaches, I've loaded groceries into cars nicer than mine. Yes, these things were hard to stomach, but each was an opportunity to help someone experience the love of Jesus.

Are we satisfied with living ordinary lives—holding tightly to everything we have, keeping it all, playing it safe? Or do we yearn for extraordinary lives? Are we eager to experience the adventure of giving it all away to Jesus and watching Him multiply our lives to touch the multitudes with compassion?

Mother Teresa reminds us, "At the end of life, we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made or how many great things we have done. We will be judged by, 'I was hungry and you gave Me food to eat, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was homeless and you took Me in.'"

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Watch as Dave Donaldson shares how God's stimulus plan works
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