

“ $- + \times \div = \%$ ”

(2 Corinthians 9:6-12)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) “SIGNS” Testimony Video; (#2) Front-Back sheet w/Personal Plan for Stewardship Growth Chart & Congregational Giving Patterns Chart]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 11-6-11]

--I--

1. [Traditional Service ONLY] Read Text: 2 Corinthians 9:6-12 and Pray.

2. [WATCH “SIGNS” TESTIMONY VIDEO...]

A--Webster’s Dictionary gives one of the definitions of the word “SIGN” as: “*a symbol that denotes a mathematical operation.*”

B--Now, math wasn’t my favorite subject in school, but I *do* still regularly use many of its most common symbols.

C--And as we continue today thinking about the biblical concept of stewardship, I want to use a few of these “math signs” to help us identify and remember at least six biblical principles for wise financial management.

D--I believe we find all six of them in today’s scripture from 2 Corinthians 9, where Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians about the virtues and benefits of generosity.

[Contemp. Service ONLY: Listen to what he says...(Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-12, NRSV)]

--II--

3. First of all, I believe that the **MINUS SIGN** (“-“) reminds us of Paul’s words here about the dangers of stinginess.

A--Verse 6a says that “*The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly*” and Verse 7 warns us to give “*not reluctantly or under compulsion...*”

1--In other words, when you and I selfishly hold onto relationships, possessions, and money, it creates what’s called a “scarcity mentality” -- the idea that since life is defined by limited resources, we must aggressively protect what we have at all costs.

2--Now, this mindset, you may already know, has led to wars and all kinds of violence when people become jealous and covetous of things that didn’t belong to them (whether they were land, gold, water, oil, or even women!)

B--So, Paul here is using reverse psychology here: he’s encouraging believers to be generous givers first by warning us of what will come to pass if we’re *not* (e.g., namely, the scarcity that we fear)

4. The **DIVISION and MULTIPLICATION SIGNS** (“÷” and “x”) I think can remind us of what God initially does with our gifts of generosity.

A--In Verse 9 Paul quotes from the book of Psalms, saying that “[God] scatters abroad, [and] he gives to the poor”¹ --in other words, when you & I give generously, He first takes our giving and *divides* it among many to make a difference in the world.

B--But Verse 10b then says that He “*multiplies [our] seed for sowing and increases the harvest of [our] righteousness.*”²

C--In other words, God then blesses our giving & returns part of it to us, so that we can in turn give even more in the future to help still others, reinforcing the saying that many of us have heard before: “*You can’t out-give God.*”³

D--And let me just say that as I was writing, all of this reminded me of a Bible story from Matthew 14:13-21 where Jesus *divides* the simple generosity of a small boy (with five loaves & two fish) and *multiplies* it so that it becomes enough to feed 5000 people.

E--So, another way of describing this division/multiplication principle is that with God, “*The RESULT (of our giving) is always greater than the sum of the parts!*”

5. ...Which is why the **EQUAL SIGN** (“=”) reminds us of those results.

A--Verses 11-12 say that our “*great generosity... will produce thanksgiving to God*” and also “*suppl[y] the needs of the saints*” -- in other words, the *outcome / result* of our generosity is that God’s work is acknowledged, & the needs of God’s people are met.

B--You may have noticed that my offering prayers often refer to the fact that giving is not just a way to meet the needs of others, but that it’s also a way for us to say “thank you” to God for all His blessings in our lives.

6. And something that’s implied throughout today’s discussion is that biblical giving is never tied legalistically to any specific dollar amount, but instead to a *percentage* of our income (symbolized, of course, by the **“%” SIGN**)

A--This is why the Old Testament sets the tithe (10%) as beginning point for faithful giving, and why Jesus later challenges followers to give essentially “as much as you can” sacrificially, *without* ever setting an exact amount.

B--And this means that even in an economy like ours (where our *actual* income may have shrunk over the last few years), we can still *increase* our generosity by increasing the percentage of our giving.

7. Finally, though, the most important stewardship principle found in today’s scripture is one that I believe can best symbolized by the **PLUS SIGN** (“+”).

A--Listen to the many places from today’s scripture that point to this principle:

- 1--Verses 6b-7: "*the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully...* [for] *God loves a cheerful giver*"
- 2--Verse 8: "*God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance...*"
- 3--Verse 10: "[God] *supplies seed to the sower [e.g.,us] and bread for food.*"
- 4--And Verse 11 says that you and I "*will be enriched in every way for [our] great generosity.*"

B--All of these, you see, offer encouragement for us to GROW in (or increase) our generosity -- to learn that the more we give away to God and others, the more blessings will accumulate to us, as well. ⁴

C--All-Saints Sunday is actually a great time to remember this -- think about it:

- 1--You and I are blessed *today* (both as individuals *and* as a church) because those who've gone before us (the "saints") were generous with their own lives.
- 2--Our church buildings, ministries, and other resources that we have *today* are possible because of the generosity of *their* time, talents, and money in the *past*.

D--And now, it's *our* turn to be a plus sign ("+") for future generations through *our own* giving -- it's *our* turn to increase our generosity (to "plus" our percentage, so to speak), so that God's work can be carried out more effectively in our world.

--III--

8. So, let me ask: Are you growing in *your* generosity to the work of God's kingdom? Do you increase your giving every year as a percentage of your income? Or are you still giving the same that you've been giving for years?

A--To help with this, I want to provide each of us with several tools that I hope will help us *grow* in our giving next year [Have ushers hand out sheet; then I explain each one]

- (#1) "**Congregational Giving Patterns Chart**" (thru end of Sept 2011): I invite you to write the # of giving units as I call them out, beginning with the top step at the *far right* (those who've so far given more than \$9000 in 2011):

←----- ←----- ←----- ←----- ←----- ←----- ←-----
560 / 30 / 25 / 21 / 30 / 13 / 15 / 15 / 23 / 22 / 9 / 10

(Where are you now? Do you think it's where God would *want* you to be?)

- (#2) "**Personal Plan for Stewardship Growth Chart**": find your annual income (*individual*, not household) and where you are in the amount that you give monthly; then over the next week, prayerfully consider growing the % of your generosity in 2012 by moving at least one column to the right.

B--Now again, please don't view these as an attempt to impose a legalistic burden -- they are merely *tools for prayerful consideration of growth*.

C--But however you choose to do it, my prayer is that we'll each discover that when we (in Paul's words) "*sow bountifully,*" we'll "*reap bountifully*" and "*be enriched in every way for [our] great generosity, which... produces thanksgiving to God.*"

D--So, my prayer is that we would each learn that as we *grow* in generosity (+ our %), God will *multiply* (x) and *divide* (÷) our gifts *so that* (=) lives are changed through the work of His church in our world.⁵

9. [PRAY]

ENDNOTES:

¹ Paul here is paraphrasing Psalm 112:9.

² Verse 8 says something similar when it says that "*God is able to provide [us] with every blessing in abundance, so that by always have enough..., [we] may share abundantly in every good work.*"

³ I don't understand how it works, but I've noticed that when I'm generous in giving, there are often gifts that come back to me that I'm not expecting -- it's because God has "multiplied" *my* gift so even more people can be helped.

⁴ The founder of Methodism John Wesley had three simple rules he shared for the proper use of money that parallel this point: earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can.

⁵ Christian Giving is not an economic exchange. It is instead a discipline meant to train us in selflessness -- it keeps us mindful of the needs of others, so that God's church can meet the spiritual, physical and emotional needs of others in our world.