

Sermon for Sunday, October 15, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GIFT LIST FOR CHRISTIANS"

II Corinthians 8:1-7

Text: "For they gave according to their means...and beyond their means...but first they gave themselves..." II Corinthians 8: 3 and 5

Last year it was my privilege to journey to Greece and to visit the ancient sites of many of the cities that St. Paul visited. We flew into modern Kavala, which was the ancient seaport city of Neapolis. You will remember that when St. Paul was evangelizing in ancient Asia Minor, he was at Troas when God gave him a visit. He saw a man of Macedonia crying out, "come over into Macedonia and help us." The Bible says that St. Paul set sail for the mainland of Europe and as a consequence, the whole course of Western civilization was changed. When St. Paul first landed in Europe, it was at Neapolis, the seaport city for Philippi. There in Macedonia we visited the sites of those ancient cities where St. Paul first preached the gospel. We visited Philippi and stood in the city square where Paul was arrested, and where Lidia, the first European convert to Christianity lived. It was there that the Philippian jailer was converted. We visited Thessalonike where Paul established a church and to which he was to write two letters, first and second Thessalonians. We stopped to take pictures of the great lion that guarded the gateway to the ancient city of Amphipolos where Paul stopped to talk about Jesus. Later on we stopped to take pictures of the monument at Thermopylae, that narrow strip of land between the cliffs and the sea where the handful of brave Spartans under Leonidas had held off the collective might of Xerxes' Persian armies long enough for Greece to mobilize. It was necessary for St. Paul to pass that way as he journeyed towards Athens, and surely he, too, stopped to admire the courage of those brave men who had laid down their lives in 480 B.C., centuries before his time.

Eventually St. Paul was to make his way past Athens to Corinth and there he was to establish a flourishing church that was to exist for centuries. Our scripture for this morning is a portion of a letter that St. Paul wrote to those Corinthians and he tells them about those churches he had established in upper Greece in Macedonia. He tells the Corinthians two things about those Macedonian Christians. First, he says that the first thing they did was to give themselves to the Lord. Then, second, he says that growing out of that, they gave according to their means and beyond their means for the work of Jesus.

With that in mind, this morning I would like to talk about the world today, about the church in the world, and about a gift list for modern Christians. First, let's talk about the world today, I won't spend much time on this subject because you know about it as well as I do. One has only to read the front page each morning to realize that we live in a fallen world. The papers are filled with stories of murder, rape robbery, and dishonesty, even among the highest officials of the country. When we turn to the international scene, we read of genocide in Cambodia, of nuclear build-up in Russia, of war in Lebanon, of Marxist guerrillas in Rhodesia and South America who murder missionaries and shoot helpless victims in cold-blooded murder. The dollar declines and inflation threatens to explode our economy so that all we have worked for and saved may very well become valueless. All in all it is not a very pleasant picture that we see in the world about us. But we ought not to be too surprised. The Bible tells us quite plainly that man, made in the image of God, has rebelled against his creator and as a result is fallen. Sin has become a part of his life. And while there are still many vestiges of man's glory that lead him to greatness, there is a flaw in man that inevitably tarnishes and corrupts his best. As we look back across the centuries, man has been capable of rising to the heights of grandeur and greatness, but always it has collapsed and ended in rubble. That is because man is flawed. He is defective.

There is a fatal defect in him--the defect of greed, of selfishness, of self centeredness that leads to disaster. Yes, man is fallen--he is a sinner. At the turn of this century, man in the midst of the scientific revolution had become optimistic about himself. He felt that given enough time and enough knowledge, he could cure the ills of humanity and build a brave new world. But a lot of wars later, thoughtful man is not so optimistic about himself and his world.

The second thing we might talk about is the church of Jesus in this kind of a world. But here again we are introduced to man's folly and foolishness. Many in the church today have actually abandoned the faith. They do not believe that Jesus is the divine Son of God. They do not believe that he died for the sins of the world and that he rose from the dead. Instead, they have come to believe that he is a nice man--perhaps the finest human being that ever lived--and that we ought to live the kind of life that this fine human being lived. But there is a problem about this sort of Jesus. If Jesus is just the finest example of humanity who gave us a model to follow, then the emphasis of the church will be on what he did and not on who he was.

For many in the church today, that is exactly the case. In all sincerity, they believe that Jesus was a fine human being and that we ought to do the things he did. And for them, that means creating a new world economic order where the goods of the world are redistributed. And if you believe that, it means that you are committed to some form of socialistic Marxism. It also means that you are willing to support revolution to achieve your goals. For that reason, the World Council of Churches made a grant to Marxist revolutionaries in Rhodesia--and then those same revolutionaries murdered 12 missionaries, shot down a civilian plane, and murdered the survivors.

By the same token, some--even in our own beloved Presbyterian Church--are working to control our denomination. Their goal is to use the church as an instrument of power to bring about social reform, to create a new international economic order that is socialistic in character. They are committed and dedicated people who admire Jesus as a wonderful human being. In all sincerity they believe they are doing the right thing. In the process, they are giving themselves to a visionary cause which is humanistic and socialistic.

This brings me to the third thing that I indicated I wished to talk about, and that is a gift list for modern Christians. If you believe that Jesus is just a wonderful human being--even if he is the finest example of humanity that the world has ever seen--this church is not for you. We do not believe Jesus was just a wonderful human being, although he surely was. No, we believe that Jesus was the divine Son of God, that he came to this earth to die for the sins of fallen man, that God raised him from death as a pledge that we, too, will be raised if we trust in him. Jesus did not come to set us an example, although he surely did. He did not come to establish a new world economic order. No, Jesus came first and primary to heal the brokenness between God and man. He came to reestablish our relationship to God.

With that in mind, the first thing we have on our gift list for Christians is the giving of ourselves. St. Paul said that is what the Christian in Macedonia did. He says that first they gave themselves. A lot of people are opposed to socialistic Marxism, opposed to political revolution, opposed to a new economic order. But they are often not willing to give anything in their position. St. Paul says that the man who understands the world and what is happening in it, the man who wants the right kind of a world, is a man who first gives himself.

I want to ask you this morning, have you given yourself? Have you committed your life to Jesus? Those early Christians were poor people who were often persecuted. But they gave themselves to Jesus and the future of their world belonged to them.

The future didn't belong to the rich or powerful. The future didn't belong to kings and princes and world rulers. The future didn't belong to the intelligentsia or the philosophical or the wise. No, the future belonged to those who committed themselves and gave themselves to Jesus.

The same must be true today. With whom or with what does the future of our world lie? Does it lie with economic orders or industrial giants or military powers? No, in truth the future for our world really lies with brave men and women who are giving themselves to Jesus.

So the first thing on the gift list for the Christian is himself. As St. Paul put it, first they gave themselves. The second gift on the Christian's list is his Christian stewardship for the work of God's kingdom. In the sort of world we live in with the kind of challenges we face and the threats before us, tokenism among Christians will not get the job done. The forces that face us will not be defeated by lukewarm Christians with token giving. It will take Macedonian-type Christians according to their means and--as St. Paul said of those early Macedonians--beyond their means.

Let me suggest several areas where our giving here at Central must reflect first our commitment to Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world, and second, our willingness to give according to our means and beyond. One such area is our ministry right here at Central. Most of you are aware that Central has gained a reputation in this city as a conservative, evangelical, Bible-believing congregation who takes Jesus seriously as the Son of God. Not all churches and not all ministers believe this. If we are to be faithful to Jesus we must have a dynamic, vital, effective witness in our own church. People in this city who are looking for meaning in their lives are watching this church. They are watching to see if we truly believe what we say and if we are willing to back up our commitment with our gifts. I cannot impress upon you how imperative it is that we put our money where our hearts are. You and I have the financial resources to support this church and to give it the things it needs for its ministry. If we do not raise such a faithful witness to this city, who will do it?

But secondly, not only must we raise up a witness in our city, we must raise up a witness in our denomination. Central is one of the truly great churches in the Presbyterian Church, U.S. We have taken a leadership role in the denomination to say what we believe, to lift up Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We have committed ourselves with other faithful congregations to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. And if we believe in our church and her Lord, we will give and give of our resources to raise up a witness for him, to provide the resources for those programs that honor him, to provide the means whereby the battle to lead our denomination in the ways of Jesus may be waged faithfully and effectively. It is not enough to be concerned only here at home in our own congregation and our own city. We must provide the resources that the battle for truth, for the battle for the right, the battle for the truth about Jesus can be fought and won. We owe that to our fellow Christians across the denomination who have no one else to fight for them.

But thirdly, we will go on to provide the resources that the gospel of Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of Sinners may be proclaimed to the whole world. Are men lost apart from Jesus? Is there no hope apart from the Cross? Can the wounds of the world be healed apart from the Balm of Gilead? If we believe that Jesus is the only hope of a lost and dying and desperate world, we will give and give and give of our means and beyond our means that the world may know that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Yes, it is an incredible world we live in. It is a world that is broken and fallen and alienated from God. But God has sent his own son into the world to die for that world, to restore men to fellowship with him. That is the only true hope of our world. And Jesus can be carried to that world only by men and women committed to him, who first give themselves and then give of their means and beyond their means. Will this congregation be that kind of a church--and will you be that kind of a Christian?

So the first thing on the gift list for the Christian is himself. As St. Paul put it, first they gave themselves. The second gift on the Christian's list is his Christian stewardship for the work of God's Kingdom. In the sort of world we live in with the kind of challenges we face and the threats before us, tokens among Christians will not get the job done. The foremost task we will not be helped by taking Christians with token giving. It will take sacrificial-type Christians according to their means and--as St. Paul said of those early missionaries--beyond their means.

Let me suggest several areas where our giving needs to be different than our commitment to Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world, and second, our willingness to give according to our means and beyond. One such area is our ministry right here in Central. Most of you are aware that Central has gained a reputation in this city as a conservative, evangelical, Bible-believing congregation who takes Jesus seriously as the Son of God. And all churches and all ministers believe this. If we are to be faithful to Jesus we must have a dynamic, vital, effective witness in our own church. Despite the fact that we are looking for meaning in their lives are watching this church. They are watching to see if we truly believe what we say and if we are willing to back up our commitment with our gifts. I cannot impress upon you how important it is that we get our own giving and hearts are. You and I have the financial resources to support the church and to give in the things it needs for its ministry. If we do not raise such a faithful witness to this city, who will?

But secondly, not only must we raise up a witness in our city, we must raise up a witness in our denomination. Central is one of the truly great churches in the Presbyterian Church, U.S. We have taken a leadership role in the denomination in any way we believe, to lift up Jesus as Lord and Saviour. We have committed ourselves with other faithful congregations to proclaim again as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. And if we believe in what we have said, we will give and give of our resources to raise up a witness that will provide the means whereby the battle to lead for those purposes that honor God, to provide the means whereby the battle to lead our denomination in the way of Jesus may be waged faithfully and effectively. It is not enough to be concerned only with our own congregation and our own city. We must provide the resources that the battle for truth, for the battle for the right, the battle for the truth about Jesus can be fought and won. We owe that to our fellow Christians across the denomination who have no one else to fight for them.

But thirdly, we will begin to provide the resources that the gospel of Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world may be proclaimed to the whole world. As we look again from Jesus, is there anyone apart from the Cross? On the words of that world he looked again from the Cross? If we believe that Jesus is the only hope of a lost and dying and desperate world, we will give and give and give of our means and beyond our means and beyond our means that Jesus Christ is Lord.