

FOOLISH OPEN HANDS

I have a confession to make.
I AM a Toronto Maple Leaf.
Yes, I am a member of the team.

Some of you may not be surprised, considering how well the team did last year. But, don't blame me. I didn't play last season, but the real reason I'm moving to Ontario is to be put back on active status.

You look skeptical. You think I'm too old, don't you?
Well, I used to be a Maple Leaf; I really did play hockey with Dave Keon.
..... Okay, okay,..... it was at Dave Keon's summer camp, but I did play a championship game at Maple Leaf Gardens,.....
Well..... it might have been a midget championship.

And, I Have been to games at the Gardens,..... and I have a Maple Leaf ball cap,.....and.....I watch them on TV,.....

Truth be told,.....maybe I'm just a fan. I'm just a fan.
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We call ourselves "Christian"  
We claim to be followers of Christ, but..... what does that really mean?  
How does one rightfully / honestly become a follower of Christ?

Or,.....are we just fans?

What areas of our lives is God lord over?  
Jesus turned everything over to God. Jesus completely trusted God.

What things / what areas do we completely trust God?  
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We likely trust God with life after death--the hereafter.
But of course, we have no control over that anyway.

What about our health / our bodies? ???
I'm sure we do when illness is beyond anyone's control.

What about our day to day decisions?
Or,.....do we merely seek God's affirmation? Do we control our own lives, and then assume God's blessings?

And,.....what about our resources / our money?

Does God control the fruit of our time and energy,...or...do we simply pay dues to appease God and to make ourselves feel generous?

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Philippi is today's focus from our summer series on NT churches, and Philippi was cited by Paul as a wonderful model for giving.

As we shall see, Giving is not just an act of monetary exchange.  
Giving is an attitude / a demonstration of one's understanding of life.  
And, Giving is a key part of spirituality.

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Some contextual / historical background is always helpful.

The city of Philippi was in Macedonia.

Macedonia is part of the Balkan peninsula, and part is in northern Greece. It is a port city on a major trade route.

Alexander the Great was from Macedonia, and Philippi was named after his father, Philip II.

It became a Roman city in 42 BCE.

The Acts text reveals that Paul joined the Jews at a worship place that was outside. Scholars conclude that there were not enough Jews there to have a synagogue, so they worshipped at a designated place outside of the city, by the river. This was a common mode of operation for Paul--presenting the message of Christ to the Jews, first.

Most of the them at the gathering would have been Gentile converts to Judaism, and the vast majority would have been women. Lydia is one of them--a Gentile proselyte.

Adult Gentile men didn't particularly care for the "cutting" requirement to convert to Judaism.

Lydia proved to be very generous and hospitable; however, the real praise for Philippi church's generosity is found in second Corinthians and in the letter to the Philippians.

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In our 2nd Corinthian's text, Paul uses the Macedonians / the Philippi church as an example for others. He desires to motivate the other churches to grasp true giving.

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It should be noted that it was common for the Gentile NT churches to sent money to the Palestinian, Jewish Christians.

The Christians in the Jerusalem area were really hurting financially.

They needed the money, and giving was also a bit of a donation / an investment.

Receiving outside aid lessened their arrogance. In the early days, the Palestinian Christians were the purebreds. They had the family connections.

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You may wonder why the Palestinian Christians were so poor.

Augustine declared that their early passion to give away / share all their possessions was the reason.

Augustine made a stern condemnation of socialism, stating for all Christians "DON'T be so foolish"... don't give away all your wealth. If you do, you'll become poor just like the Palestinian Christians.

Truth is: the communal practice was never fully embraced. A few did give away their everything, just as only a few OT Jews tithed.

Moreover, their poverty was mostly caused by severe Roman persecution and the rejection by their Jewish neighbours.

Fortunately, many Gentile churches came to their aid with generous giving, especially the church in Philippi.

Not only did they give generously, the Philippians begged to do more / they desired to engage in the "privilege" of giving.

They "Got it" / they understood.

The Philippians were giving to God. They were participating in Holy Grace.

Paul never used the word money in describing their passion for giving. He calls it service, blessings, offerings and grace.

He ties Giving to God's Spirit-- to Spirituality ....to Grace!

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In the letter to Philippians, Paul lays out more praise for them, and clarifies the real beauty and wonder to their "giving and receiving."

The Philippians understood grace and trusting God.

In verse 17, Paul uses banking terminology, but he's not referring to a financial balance sheet.

Rather, he saying, "It's not about me or the money you gave me."

What is important is the spiritual fruit that grows because of your openness to give and receive.

The value of giving is far beyond the dollar amount.

Giving / releasing and... receiving is pleasing to God.

Paul notes, in closing, the spiritual lesson that rises from living with open hands, and it is:

"God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to God's riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

In other words, living with open hands that give and receive is the way of Christ. Being a vessel that does not hold on, but allows grace and all gifts and bounty to pass on.....is the way of Christ.

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Being and living in this fashion requires trusting that God will fully satisfy.

And,.....as Augustine and any financial advisor will declare, "It is foolishness",.....

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Since my days here are numbered, I'm going to risk sharing some personal stories about money.

I do this NOT to be an example. I am Not a model. No one should desire to follow my example. I'm not the one to be followed.

What I will share is my testimony / my testimony of some situations that showed me that open hands living rings true.

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For many reasons, most of my life has been a hand to mouth existence. I usually live paycheque to paycheque.

Rarely, have I had more than \$100 in reserve. That's my emergency fund.

I think this is good for me. I even believe God uses my financial situation to help me grow spiritually.

To be sure, I pray a whole lot more when I don't know how I'm going to pay all the bills.

Yet, it isn't just a matter of frugality, although reducing a living standard is beneficial.

If I have extra at the end of the month, I tend to give it away.

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There was an occasion at seminary when I received a tax refund of over \$800. That seemed like a lot back then.

I was going to use it to pay down some debts, but then I discovered that a friend's daughter needed extensive dental work.

So, I found a way to anonymously give him the money.

Tying my name to it would diminish the gift to a donation.

I was blessed by his joyous delight, and that was a spiritual lesson.

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Although I often do take advantage of tax credits for donations, I've found that it reduces the sense of gift / of releasing, and thus the spiritual insight, too. My spirituality improves when money is devalued.

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I confess that Living paycheque to paycheque does cause me a degree of discomfort when I go to fundraisers.

I frequently don't have a reserve to tap into to make much of a donation,.....and fundraisers perplex me, too.

It seems like most people are controlling their money quite well, only releasing some when they feel like it.

I don't understand that. That situation is beyond my realm of experience and understanding, and.....so it doesn't make sense to me.

If they have excess money in reserve,..... then why didn't we hire a youth pastor when we so desperately needed one?

And,.....that need is sadly passing.....

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I don't mean to be judgmental. This is my testimony, and I truly don't understand the holding on.

I rarely had that luxury, and I say this JUST for me, and when I did hold on, it hurt me spiritually.

Wealth makes me feel independent and powerful.

I AM confident saying, that most people handle money far better than I do, and are not affected by it as I would be if I had excess.

So, in my ignorance, I confess that I don't understand controlling a reserve fund.

Still, in my life / in my experiences, it seems when I do have a surplus, then a greater need than mine arises,....and I conclude that must be the reason I had extra.

I am convinced that God has enabled many people to make and manage money very well, and I know it is for a reason,.....so that they can be vessels....helping others in need.

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I'm not one of those types; I've never made a lot of money, and no doubt, there have been times that I have been wasteful and mismanaged my money.

Yet,..... God is even gracious when I mess up.

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Moreover, I've learned that God does provide.

Two years ago, I was in a bit of jam.

I was in Osler, I needed to go and pick Katherine up in the city, and my truck was nearly out of gas. It was the day before pay day; I had miscalculated expenses. I was totally broke.

I've learned broke means different things to different people.

For me broke means empty as my truck's gas tank.

My credit cards were maxed out. I was broke.

So, I went to the credit union to double check at the ATM just to see if by chance there was money in my account.

There wasn't, and as I was leaving, a teller came out of the Credit Union office and handed me \$20, saying, "Here you go, this is yours."

Dumbfounded and amazed, I asked, "What do you mean?"

She replied, "Don't you remember? Two months ago, you turned in a \$20 bill that you found right here in the lobby floor. Well, we held it for 2 months and nobody claimed it, so it's yours."

I thanked her,.....and I thanked God.

I had gas money, all was well.

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I have countless stories very similar to that one.

God does provide,.....and more.....the blessings and delight is so much more.

Receiving with open hands when people give of themselves helps me to see God

The summer before last, Bruce assisted me in putting a metal roof on my barn. I should say, I helped Bruce....

When we screwed on the last panel, I turned on the song I had ready in my truck. I opened the truck doors and turned it up loud.

[play "Oh Happy Day"]
I think it made Bruce smile.

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It was great to have a new roof on the barn, but what was by far more impressive and joyous was the fact that Bruce just gave a week of his life for me.....for ME. He gave himself, and I was deeply moved by that. I was spiritually touched by that gift.

And so many have freely given--helping me on the acreage.  
I can't name everyone, but I'll name some, the list of amazing generosity includes Art, Dave, Wilf, Jake, Russ, Glen, Kevin, Carl, Steve, Clint, George,.... and on and on.

What a blessing and joy it is to receive,.....Not the money or the outcome,.....but rather the gift of giving.

God has ordained openly giving and receiving. It is grace, it is love, it is peace..... IT is Christ.

This is Paul's testimony, and it is also my testimony to how it is with God. I'm not an example. I merely learning, too.

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I'm sure you have your stories, also.
You know the wonders of God's bounty and providence.

Many of you are giving and receiving with generosity.
Most of you already know that controlling and holding on impedes / hinders our ability to truly follow Christ. It hurts us spiritually.

In contrast, our spirits soar when we reach out with open hands.

Open hands.....allow us to better trust God and to be trusted, and to better give and receive.....as Christ did.

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Perhaps, someday,.....when someone writes a history of Christians in Saskatchewan,.....it will be noted that Osler Mennonite Church learned to let go and trust God completely.  
It will be said that, Osler was just like the church in Philippi.