



# A “Cheerful” GIVER

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By Shawn L. Buice

ONE OF THE MOST difficult subjects for pastors to address from the pulpit is that of giving. To mention tithing is difficult enough, without suggesting believers give over and above the tithe. Certainly, the issue of money is a sensitive one, perhaps even more so during unstable economic times.

The apostle Paul and first-century believers were no strangers to difficult economic realities. Paul sought to help believers in other regions when they suffered difficult circumstances, like famine or poverty. During a time of need for believers in Jerusalem, Paul encouraged the church at Corinth to give because “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).<sup>1</sup> “Cheerful” and “giver” are not two words that we normally associate together. We must ask,

Right: From Melos, Greece, terra-cotta comic mask of an old man; dated to the 2nd or 1st century B.C.

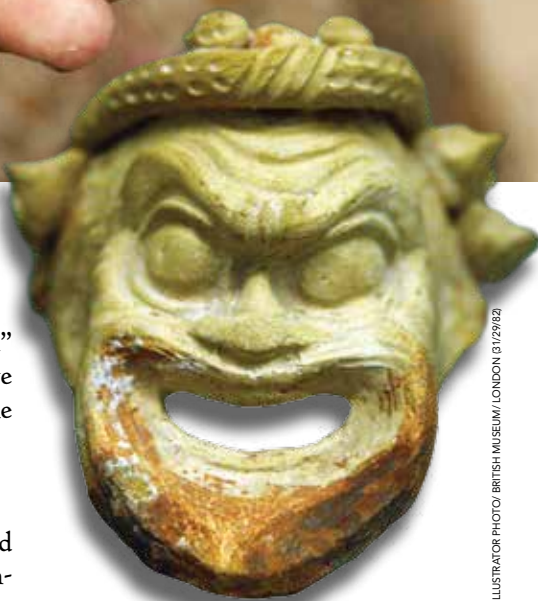
then, what does the word “cheerful” mean? Having discovered that, we can consider how that impacts the meaning of the passage.

## Understanding Meaning

Two issues need to be addressed which help us understand the meaning of a word in a particular text. One is the range of meaning for the word itself. The second issue relates to the context.

With respect to meaning, the Greek word translated “cheerful” in 2 Corinthians 9:7 is an adjective. It is the Greek word *hilaros*. The general meaning of the word is “glad,” “merry,” or “cheerful.”<sup>2</sup> This is the only instance of the Greek New Testament using the adjective *hilaros*.<sup>3</sup> Because the Greek

word sounds like our English word *hilarious*, pastors commonly proclaim that believers should be hilarious givers, almost implying that worshipers should laugh as they give. This association, however, is slightly misleading. While the English word “hilarious” is derived from the Greek word *hilaros*, we cannot assume the Greek term meant what our English term means. Paul seemed to be more concerned with the believers’



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**Left:** The western shops at Corinth; the Acrocorinth (meaning the upper city of Corinth) rises in the background.

**Above:** Terra-cotta leg unearthed at Corinth. This would have been a votive presented to the Greek god of health and heal-

ing, Asclepius. A "votive" is a gift given to a deity. Once given to the temple of a particular deity, it becomes the god's permanent property. Persons offered a votive offering in hopes of receiving some benefit or favor from a god or to express gratitude.

attitudes as they gave. This becomes evident as we study the context.

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Paul revisited an issue he addressed in his first letter to the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:10, 11; 9:5); he desired to help the poor believers in Jerusalem with some type of collection. As a means of helping, Paul mentioned the donations sent from believers in Macedonia (2 Cor. 8). He commended them highly. Having described the Macedonians' generosity, Paul next addressed the Corinthians. Two things caught Paul's attention. He acknowledged their eagerness to participate in the relief effort (9:2), and he highlighted

the generous nature of the gift they proposed to give (v. 5). The discussion of these two issues led Paul to exhort the Corinthians to "do as [each one had] decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of necessity" (v. 7). Their giving was to be conducted with a cheerful mindset as opposed to a reluctant spirit.

To further reinforce his point, Paul made three other observations. He reminded the believers at Corinth to do as they had promised (v. 5), and to do as they had decided in their hearts (v. 7). Furthermore, he reminded them that God could meet their needs (vv. 8-10).

Paul's words to the believers at Corinth are as relevant for us today as they were when he first penned them. For us to be cheerful givers, we must be willing to give as we have decided in our hearts and we must remember God can meet our needs. 6

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. Rudolf Bultmann, "ἱλαρός" (*hilaros*, cheerful) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 297.

3. Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 438.

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