

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
October 16, 2016

## **God's Indescribable Gift**

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Today, I'm continuing our October series of sermons on the topic of generosity, especially as it relates to our stewardship of money and possessions. So far, we've seen that generosity is a form of worship. All that we are and all that we have belong to God, who creates, redeems, and reigns. So through our offerings to God, we're acknowledging his sovereignty in the world and in our lives. We're expressing our heartfelt devotion and allegiance to the Lord, who alone has the power to give life and to save.

Secondly, we've seen that generosity is an expression of faith. Financial giving is one of the ways that we demonstrate our dependence on God. Through your gifts, you're showing that your confidence is in the heavenly Father, who knows you and knows what you need. So by being generous with God's generosity, you're living out your trust in a God who loves you, who will sustain you, and who will take care of you, as you make his kingdom the focus of your devotion and action.

Today, we come to our next Scripture passage, from one of Paul's letters to the church in Corinth. At this point in his letter, Paul is pushing his ongoing stewardship campaign. Not to fund the church budget or to replace the broken boiler, but to provide for the needs of impoverished Christians in the church in Jerusalem. Paul has been working on this collection for awhile now. At first, the Corinthians jumped at the opportunity to participate in the offering. They responded with desire and enthusiasm. But with time, their energy has waned and their generosity has virtually dried up. So Paul is trying to reignite some of their passion for this project. Basically, he wants them to finish what they had started.

One of the ways Paul tries to persuade the Corinthians to donate is by reminding them that God provides for them so that they can provide for others. And God certainly hasn't been stingy with the Corinthians. Indeed, his grace has been abundant among them. It's fitting, therefore, that their gifts, like God's, should be generous, not offered grudgingly or reluctantly. That's when Paul pulls some Scripture from his own memory and reminds the Corinthians that God "loves a cheerful giver" (v. 7).

There's a story about a mother who gave her child a one-dollar bill and a quarter. "Sweetheart," the mother said, "you can place either one in the offering plate. It's entirely up to you." As they were driving home, the mother asked the daughter what she had decided to give. "Well, at first I was going to give the dollar," said the daughter. "But the man behind the pulpit said God loves a cheerful giver, so I felt like I would be much more cheerful if I gave the quarter instead."

That's not exactly what Paul had in mind. If the offering plate in Corinth were filled with only quarters, I doubt that would have met Paul's definition of abundance and generosity. After all, he does say to the Corinthians, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." A couple of verses later, Paul says, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. . ." (v. 11). Notice how Paul uses the potent little phrase "so that" in our text. God will make grace abound to you *so that* you will abound in

every good work. You will be made rich *so that* you can be generous. If “so that” weren’t in the picture, then God’s gifts could just stop right where they are, with us. They could flow from God to us, and go no further. They would be exclusively for our needs and our benefit.

But that’s not how God intends things to work. He isn’t remaking us in the image of Christ so that we can simply be receivers. He’s restoring the image of the Son in us so that we can be givers. And through our giving, we participate in God’s own giving. After all, God is the source of life, the source of blessing, the source of the gifts we experience through Christ. God, says Paul, is “he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food.” God is the one who “will also supply and increase your store of seed.” God is the one who “will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.” Whatever resources we have in order to pursue righteousness and justice come from God. God is the primary giver. We’re simply the recipients of his favor and beneficence. We don’t deserve his grace, but he has generously and abundantly given us himself in Christ.

And this divine grace fulfills its purpose and finds its fruition when it flows through us to others. When we’re genuinely receiving the grace of God in Christ, we’ll be channels through which that grace flows to others. God doesn’t just want us to flourish. He wants others to flourish. And one of the primary ways he accomplishes that purpose is by having his blessings, including financial and material resources, pass through us on their way to others.

I like the way that Miroslav Volf puts it in his book *Free of Charge*, in which he explores how God gives and how we should give. Volf stresses that God blesses us so that we would share with others. He says: “To the extent that we are channels of gifts, however, we can’t just do with them as we please. They come to us with an ultimate name and address other than our own. Though in our hands, they are on their way elsewhere.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, God has made us to be channels of his gift-giving. Now that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t also benefit from the gifts we receive from God. The gifts could be material needs, like food and clothing and shelter, or money to pay the bills. The gifts could be something less material, like ideas or skills or a particular passion. The gifts could be capacities, like physical health and strength. We can enjoy these gifts and draw upon them even as we’re passing them on to others. As we saw in last Sunday’s Scripture passage, God is aware of and responsive to our basic daily needs. He cares for us and promises to provide for us. But his provision for us is just part of the bigger picture of how he provides for the world and all that he has made.

In today’s Scripture passage, Paul wants the folks in the church at Corinth to remember that whatever their particular level of abundance, be it great or small, what they have has been given by God in Christ. And it’s not all supposed to stay there with them. A lot of it is actually intended for their poor brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem. By not giving as they should, the Corinthians are actually holding up, or blocking, the flow of God’s giving. Instead, they need to be what God intends them to be, channels through which his gifts flow on their way to Jerusalem.

Bill O’Brien tells the following story about the radical generosity of a poor rural church in China:

A few years ago I was with a group in Nanjing, China. On Sunday we visited various churches in the city. An older Chinese woman now living in Los Angeles chose to visit a church across the river from Nanjing, a poor church composed of farmers. The 900 who were present for the service wanted to hear a word from their sister from the states, so Mrs. Chang brought greetings from her church in Los Angeles. She told how the Lord had added many to their

church and how they were currently building a large new addition. Then after a word of blessing for this church, she took her seat.

At the close of the worship time, Mrs. Chang was called back to the front. The pastor said her words had thrilled their hearts. They wanted her to have the morning offering to help with the new building in Los Angeles — about \$140. When their overflowing joy welled up in generosity, they gave beyond their ability.<sup>2</sup>

That's part of the nature of grace. It goes beyond human capability. It goes beyond what seems reasonable. It goes beyond what's fair. It goes beyond what's deserved. In fact, grace actually offers what's underserved. Grace gives what's completely unmerited. So it is with God's grace in Christ. Paul has already reminded the Corinthians of how they got what they have: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (8:9). That is the grace in which they, and we, stand.

As God's people in Christ, we need to regularly come back to the big story of God's grace. We need to remember that the Lord's abundant grace makes us what we are and gives us all that we have. So we need to be on guard against our tendency to hinder the expansion of God's grace as it makes its way to others. As Miroslav Volf says, "Things I am given are not just mine. Even if they are in my hands, some of them belong to my neighbors in need. I have an obligation to pass them on. If I block the flow of God's gifts, I haven't just failed the giving God; I've also failed the intended recipients. They have a right to the gifts, and I have an obligation to give."<sup>3</sup>

Your generosity with what God has given to you is a channel for the flow of God's grace into the world. If we take what's in the offering and trace it back its source, we'll see that it doesn't begin when you and I take what we've earned, or inherited, or been given, and place it in the plate. No, we have to go further back, beyond what we ourselves have done. We have to go back to what God has done. We have to go back to what Paul, in the last verse of today's text, calls God's "indescribable gift." This "indescribable" gift certainly includes the money that the Corinthians have given, which comes from God. But most of all, behind that money is Jesus Christ himself. He is God's greatest, most extravagant gift.

Giving has its origin in God and its purpose in God. That's because in Christ, God's life-giving generosity flows to us, and works to create generosity in us for the sake of others. Then that generosity returns to God in the form of thanks. That's the flow of grace. As Paul says, "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God" (v. 12). In other words, when the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem receive the gifts of the Christians in Corinth, they'll give thanks, not just to the Corinthians, but most of all to God.

This flow of grace, from God and eventually back to God, never stops. That's why you're here for worship today. That's why we sing and pray and preach. That's why you place your gifts in the offering plate, sowing generously with a cheerful heart. You give because generosity is an act of worship. You give because generosity is an expression of faith and dependence on God. You give because generosity is a channel for the flow of God's goodness to others, especially those who are suffering and in need. You give because generosity brings glory to God. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 60.

<sup>2</sup> Bill O'Brien, "Begging to Give," *Christian Century* (June 14, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Volf, *Free of Charge*, 60-61.