

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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A Generous Church

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

In this morning's Scripture passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul is pressing on with his stewardship campaign. Not to fund the church budget or 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.

At this point in his letter, Paul really wants to drive home his message about giving to this offering. So we would expect him to pull out some of his best arguments and make some of his strongest points. We would expect him to emphasize the things that really matter most.

This may help explain why, in our opening verse, he says, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (v. 6). This type of principle, or maxim, was widely used in circles beyond just Paul's ministry and message. There were other religious traditions and schools of thought where folks affirmed that what you sow determines what you harvest, not just in the field but in life in general.

Paul applies this same principle to giving, in order to motivate the Corinthians to get moving and finish their offering for the poor in Jerusalem. Notice that Paul's emphasis isn't just on sowing and reaping, but on sowing and reaping "generously." According to Paul, passing the plate in church isn't just about dollars and cents; It's about generosity.

Paul uses the word "generous," or some form of it, several times in our Scripture passage. In fact, if we back up even further to the beginning of chapter 8, we see that Paul opens his discussion of the Jerusalem collection by lifting up the churches in Macedonia whom God enabled to give generously, even though they themselves were poor. They not only gave as much as they were able, but beyond their ability. Then, at the end of the section right before today's text, Paul reminds the Corinthians that when they first decided to participate in the Jerusalem offering, they had promised a generous gift.

When we make our financial gifts to God through the church, we often speak in terms of "stewardship." Stewardship is a biblical concept that has served us well, and has given us a helpful way of looking at how we manage the things that God has entrusted to us, including financial resources. But the language of stewardship isn't the only way the Bible talks about our relationship with money and possessions. As we see in today's text, "generosity" is another lens through which we can look at our giving practices.

An organization that tracks giving patterns recently issued a report that maps out how people around the globe practice generosity. They took into account four different

categories or giving types. Money – any gift of money to an individual or organization outside of family. Time – all forms and contexts of voluntary giving of time to an individual or organization outside of family. Items – any gift of a material object—such as food, clothing, personal products, or furniture—to an individual or organization outside of family. Advocacy – any proactive advocacy, public endorsement, or promotion of a cause.¹

As you can tell, acts of generosity can take various forms. This particular report was based on surveying thousands of people in five continents, and it contained numerous revelations. One was that in the USA, both dollars and donors were down in 2022. They also found that younger generations everywhere were more generous than older generations. They gave more often and in more ways, though older generations still donate more dollars in some countries. The report also noted that people in Kenya and India volunteer at twice the rate of people in Europe and North America. I was also struck by this particular summary statement regarding global giving: “The most inescapable insight is that although giving cultures vary widely from country to country, **we consistently find the most generosity in less wealthy countries** (i.e., those with lower Gross National Income per capita).”

I think of Paul who, as I noted earlier, cited the example of the Macedonians, who gave out of their poverty, in his efforts to motivate the Corinthians. Paul wasn’t just trying to exhort his congregations to meet an offering goal. He was working to cultivate a culture of giving, an ecology of generosity.

So what does it mean for us to be generous givers and to be a generous church? What does generosity look like in our lives, both as individual Christians and as a congregation? What are some of the characteristics of generous giving? Let’s look more closely at what Paul says to the Corinthians, and listen for what God is saying to us about our own generosity.

At the end of 9:5, Paul describes the Corinthians’ promised gift this way: “Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.” Here, Paul tells us what generosity is by telling us what it is not. Generous giving isn’t grudging giving. In other words, giving that’s done unwillingly or sparingly. Thus Paul’s warning about sowing sparingly. He spells this out further in verse 7: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (NIV 2011). So the opposite of generous giving is giving with reluctance or because you feel forced to, rather than because you freely and willingly choose to.

By contrast, generosity is marked by cheerfulness. The Greek word that gets translated as “cheerful” is a term from which we get our English word “hilarious.” Paul is calling for a kind of giving that has a certain hilarity about it. Now does this mean that when we receive the offering, as I’m sitting in my chair beside the pulpit, I should be scanning the sanctuary, taking note of your facial expressions, to see if you’re smiling and laughing as you put your money in the plate, or if you’ve got a sad look on your face, as if the money has to be pried loose from your hands? Is that what this verse means? No, probably not.

Nor does it mean that cheerful giving, generous giving, has to be unplanned and spontaneous, something we do only when the right mood or the right feeling hits us. True, there may be times when being generous means responding to an unexpected need or crisis, or that God is unexpectedly moving you, in some other way, to go above and beyond your regular pattern of giving. But at the same time, some of the most generous giving is the giving you do week in and week out, Sunday by Sunday, month by month, year by year, as you practice generosity across time. That kind of steady, habitual financial generosity does a lot to form you into the likeness of Christ.

So remember that cheerful and habitual can go together. Paul isn't saying give only when it feels good, or just when a need arises. He's simply saying that we shouldn't give grudgingly. That is, giving with a sense of sadness and regret that we're actually having to part with that money and entrust it to the Lord. On the contrary, the kind of givers that God smiles upon are marked by a sense of gladness and a spirit of sacrifice. They remember God's goodness, his abundant provision and his continual care, and they cultivate the habit of generosity.

What else can our text say to us about generous giving? Well, according to Paul, generous giving is the work of God. It's not something that you and I look deep within ourselves and discover. It's not something that we muster on our own. Instead, generous giving is itself a gift of God. In verse 8, Paul says, "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." Generosity is one of the ways that God's grace manifests itself in the life of God's people. In other words, God creates the generosity in us, and supplies the resources for that generosity to use. That's because generosity is what God intends for us through Christ. It's what God intends us to be. We are created anew through Christ for lives of generosity.

In his book *Run with the Horses*, Eugene Peterson tells how he saw some birds teaching their young to fly. There were three young swallows perched on a dead branch that stretched out over a lake. According to Peterson,

One adult swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch—pushing, pushing, pushing. The end one fell off. Somewhere between the branch and the water below, the wings started working and the fledgling was off on his own. Then the second one. The third one, however, was not to be bullied. At the last possible moment his grip on the branch loosened just enough so that he swung downward, then tightened again, bulldog tenacious. The parent pecked at the desperately clinging talons until it was more painful for the chick to hang on than risk the insecurities of flying. The grip was released and the wings began pumping. The mature swallow knew what the chick did not—that it would fly—that there was no danger in making it do what it was designed to do.

Peterson goes on to say,

Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have talons and can grasp a branch securely. They can walk; they can cling. But flying is their characteristic action and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully. Giving is what we do best. It is the air into which we were born. It is the action that was designed into us before our birth. Some people try desperately to hold on to themselves, to live for self. They look so bedraggled and pathetic doing it, hanging on to the dead branch of selfishness and self-centeredness, afraid to risk themselves on the untried wings of giving. Yet many people don't think they can live generously because they have never tried.²

As I said, God has created us anew through Christ for lives of generosity. Paul says, "You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. . ." (v. 11). Note that Paul isn't saying we should give anticipating payment back from God, as if you put ten dollars in the offering plate, and a few days later an unexpected check for \$100 will show up in your mailbox. Paul isn't saying that God guarantees to bless you back. He's simply saying that God creates the generosity in us through Christ, and supplies the resources for that generosity to use. This means that what you have, whether a lot or a little, has been given so that you can be generous with it.

And when you're generous with it, the result can be thanksgiving to God and glory to God. True, in our Scripture text, we see how generosity benefits the giver. As you practice

generosity, you experience a sense of satisfaction, a sense of joy, in being able to give sacrificially and with gladness. You grow in your management of what God has entrusted to you. You mature in the likeness of Christ who, as Paul says, was rich yet became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich (8:9). These are just some of the ways that generosity benefits you the giver.

At the same time, generous giving benefits the recipients of the gifts. It might be a material need in the congregation or a financial crisis for a family in the community. It might be a town, a city, or a country struck by natural disaster. It might be the daily expenses of missionaries. It might be the lives touched through the ongoing ministries of our church. As you give to these projects and programs, the recipients of those ministries benefit from your generosity.

It's appropriate to note the ways that generosity benefits the givers and the recipients. But the ultimate reason for generous giving is that it brings glory to God. We who have been entrusted with the resources can give thanks to God. Those who benefit from our giving can give thanks to God. All this leads to glory for God. What it all comes down to is that generosity is the work of God. God creates and enables generosity. God is the ultimate source of generosity. So when it's practiced by his people, through his grace and power, generosity reflects credit on God. Generous giving increases glory to God.

And that's why our church exists here where we are. We're here for the glory of God. I recently came across a summary description of itself that a congregation was offering to others. It read: "The congregation ... is devoted to the teaching of the Holy Bible, and is energized by prayer, worship, and fellowship. The church provides a friendly family sense of belonging to all who come and is known for their generosity both in tithes and talents to the church and their community." It was interesting to hear the church use generosity as an essential mark of its life together. May it be so for us as well. When you think of our congregation, may generous people living generous lives, in the power of the Spirit, be one of the first things that comes to mind. And when others beyond our fellowship, especially here in our community, hear the name Grace Baptist Church, may they know us as a generous church, for the glory of God.

¹ Giving Tuesday Data Commons, "Rethinking Resilience: Insights from the Giving Ecosystem," 10.

² This story is cited by David Swensen in a sermon, "Grace Gives," preached at Winthrop Street Baptist Church, Taunton, Mass., n.d.