



Lesson 8 | Generosity

Bible Text:

II Corinthians 8:1-5

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints – and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

II Corinthians 8:8-9

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

II Corinthians 9:6-8

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

Commentary

Eight Observations About Generous Giving

In our three texts from II Corinthians 8-9 we can make eight observations about Christian giving.

First, it is apparent that their giving is generous. In complimenting the Christians living in Macedonia Paul affirmed their financial faithfulness in the midst of financial hardship. Honoring God and blessing others was their passion, and this passion produced true generosity.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part (II Corinthians 8:1-2, underlining mine).

Our carnal tendency is to place our needs and wants above all else. Once we satisfy our own desires, we then consider giving to the work of the Lord. Notice how radically different is the practice of the Macedonian believers. They gave out of their *affliction* and extreme poverty. Giving is more relational than circumstantial. It is grounded in our connection with our Lord rather than the perception of our circumstances.

Second, their giving was joyful—they gave in *their abundance of joy*. Later in the passage Paul teaches that *God loves a cheerful giver* (II Corinthians 9:7). There is no hint of burdensome duty here. The law produces joyless duty, grace produces joyful privilege.

they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

Third, this kind of giving is supernatural and an evidence that the grace of God is alive and well in our hearts. Paul begins the passage by speaking of *the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia*. Our flesh resists the very idea of sacrificial and joyful giving and sends us down one of two paths. If we are financially faithful, our pride is inflated. If we are not financially faithful, our guilt is accentuated. The fruit of our generosity is evidence of the root of our understanding of God's mercy.

Fourth, their giving was truly sacrificial and violated the typical logic of the day by going *beyond their means*. In our day a typical thought pattern would be, "If I think I can afford it, I will financially support the work of the church." Note how this biblical kind of giving is a repudiation of our self-reliance. It is a refusal to make an alliance with the "Egypt" of our assets.

Fifth, their giving was totally voluntary, *of their own accord*. There was no hint of expectation or manipulation. A loving relationship produces voluntary expressions of that love. If this is true in marriage, how much truer should it be in the relationship between the bride of Christ and Jesus our Groom?

Sixth, their giving was passionate. Notice that they were begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints (underlining mine). When the needs are made known, the people of God are eager to participate in the Lord's work. We should be offended when we are not asked to participate and delighted when we are.

Seventh, their giving was first theocentric before it was strategic. They *gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us* (underlining mine). The motive of all our giving is rooted in our joyful surrender to the Lord himself. We must never divorce his revealed will from his nature and character. We yield to his will because we love his person. We love him, because he first loved us (I John 4:9).

Eighth, and finally, their giving and ours is gospel-centric. That is, it is rooted in our

response to Jesus who, *by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*. We are compelled to be generous because we are the recipients of ultimate generosity. Our motive is the pricelessness of the cross, not the balance of our checkbook.

Life Is a Pie

Imagine that your time, energy, resources, gifts, skills, and finances are represented by a pie. Do you remember as a child how you might argue with a sibling over who got that last piece of pie for dessert? The common strategy was to allow one sibling to slice the pie in half, and the other sibling to get first choice of the half they wanted. This was designed to insure fairness, because our natural (carnal) tendency would be to slice the pie to our personal advantage.

Every day we are slicing the pie. If we make one piece bigger, then by necessity another piece must become smaller. Christian stewardship is simply slicing our pie in a way that honors the Lord.

Tacey and I have dear friends in Russia whom we have known for many years. After they were married they had very few financial resources; their pie was very small. Every Sunday morning they needed to make a "pie decision." They could spend their few rubles on buying a bus pass to travel to church and attend worship, or they could stay home from church and use those rubles to buy food for a meal. They simply could not afford to do both. They faithfully chose to attend worship and, thereby, miss a meal for doing so.

God calls us to slice our pie with sacrificial generosity. When donations were being taken to build the Tabernacle (see Exodus 35), we read:

Every day we are slicing the pie... Christian stewardship is simply slicing our pie in a way that honors the Lord.

Moses said to all the congregation of Israel, 'This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to the LORD. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the LORD's contribution . . .' (Exodus 35:4-5, underlining mine)

Generosity is a great virtue and a tangible sign of godliness:

The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives; (Psalm 37:21, underlining mine)

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him (Proverbs 14:31, underlining mine).

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47, underlining mine).

John McArthur helps us understand the Greek word translated *generous* in this Acts text:

Liberality [generosity] translates *haplotes*, which has the root meaning of singleness and came to connote simplicity, single mindedness, openheartedness, and then generosity. It carries the idea of heartfelt giving that is untainted by affectation or ulterior motive. The Christian who gives with liberality [generosity] gives of himself, not for himself. (Commentary on Acts, John McArthur)

Generosity is a willingness to enlarge one piece of the pie and gladly accept that another piece of that pie will be smaller. When we give generously to the Lord and his work, we will have a smaller piece of the pie to spend on our own pleasures and preferences.

The Lord gave us a clear and compelling mandate through the apostle Paul:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them

not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share . . . (I Timothy 6:17-18, underlining mine)

What is the Holy Spirit calling you to forego? Do you dare to even ask him?

In his grace, the Lord may expand the size of our pie. If my sister and I show generosity and preference for the other, mom may pull another pie out of the fridge and surprise us with her generosity. If she doesn't, we are content and grateful. If she does, we are grateful and increasingly generous. In the gospel, has not God been extravagantly generous to us all? Our Russian friends understand this, which is why they forego a meal to attend worship. What is the Holy Spirit calling you to forego? Do you dare to even ask him?

God's Minimal Piece of the Pie

Most Bible-believing Christians are very familiar with the biblical mandate of tithing:

"Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for a blessing until there is no more need" (Malachi 3:8-10).

Clearly, by calling the failure to tithe a form of theft, God is declaring that he is the owner of that tithe (ten percent of our income). This is God's minimal piece of the pie. Indeed, the tithe belongs to the Lord.

When we speak of Christian generosity, does this not suggest that such generosity is what we give over and above our tithing? Of course, Christians have long debated the question of “How much should I give to the Lord’s work”? The challenge is to avoid a prideful spirit of legalism and self-righteousness (I give my tithe, don’t bother me any more) as well as to avoid the prideful spirit of libertarianism and self-indulgence (I give what I want, when I want, and how much I want— so don’t bother me).

Our generosity is directly proportional to our understanding of the generosity of the gospel. When our hearts are renewed by the extravagant generosity of God toward us in the gospel of his grace, we are called and compelled by that grace to be excessively generous in the giving of our time, gifts, and finances to the work of his kingdom. The former (the gospel) is the mother of the latter (our generosity). May the grateful offspring resemble the generous parent in this regard.

Questions

1. How has your understanding of generosity been expanded in this lesson?
2. How do you slice your personal pie? Do you often think of your life in this way, or has this metaphor produced in you a new way of thinking—and living?
3. What is it in our hearts that inhibits us from being sacrificially and consistently generous?
4. Specifically, what piece of your personal pie might need to get smaller in order to follow the Lord’s leading to make the support of his work larger?
5. Gospel-motivated giving is rooted in our understanding of the extravagant generosity of the Lord toward us. List below three specific ways that the Lord has been so graciously generous to you.

6. List below three specific ways that you have been graciously generous to others.

7. If you had no answer for question 6 above, preach the gospel to yourself and ask the Lord to show you more of his heart of generosity toward you, then ask him to change your heart toward him.

Suggested Prayer

(from *The Valley of Vision—A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, ed. Arthur Bennett, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, p. 158)

Privileges

O LORD GOD,

Teach me to know that grace precedes, accompanies, and follows
my salvation,
that it sustains the redeemed soul,
that not one link of its chain can ever break.

From Calvary's cross wave upon wave of grace reaches me,
deals with my sin,
washes me clean,
renews my heart,
strengthens my will,
draws out my affection,
kindles a flame in my soul,
rules throughout my inner man,
consecrates my every thought, word, work,
teaches me thy immeasurable love.

How great are my privileges in Christ Jesus!

Without him I stand far off, a stranger, an outcast;
in him I draw near and touch his kingly sceptre.

Without him I dare not lift up my guilty eyes;
in him I gaze upon my Father-God and friend.

Without him I hide my lips in trembling shame;
in him I open my mouth in petition and praise.

Without him all is wrath and consuming fire;
in him is all love, and the repose of my soul.

Without him is gaping hell below me, and eternal anguish;
in him its gates are barred to me by his precious blood.

Without him darkness spreads its horrors in front;
in him an eternity of glory is my boundless horizon.

Without him all within me is terror and dismay,
in him every accusation is charmed into joy and peace.

Without him all things external call for my condemnation;
in him they minister to my comfort,
and are to be enjoyed with thanksgiving.

Praise be to thee for grace,
and for the unspeakable gift of Jesus.