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**Creating a Culture of Generosity:
The Five “G’s” of Giving
2 Corinthians 8-9**

I seriously doubt that I will say anything new today that I haven’t said on multiple occasions before. But please don’t use that as an excuse to leave early or to surf the net on your iPhone, or worse still, to fall asleep! The fact is, Bridgeway has recently undertaken a task and launched a journey unlike anything that most of you have experienced here before. Until now we have never had to make an appeal to everyone, and by that I mean *everyone*, to search your hearts to determine with the Spirit’s help what God would have you do in terms of sacrificial giving to this local church. But with the *Expand to Exalt (E2E)* undertaking, that will now change.

The simple and unavoidable fact is that we must now figure a way to raise approximately \$1.2 million to cover the costs of the new office building and its renovations, together with the cost of construction in this building that will bring us four new children’s classrooms, in addition to other helpful changes.

There is in my approach to this issue a *strange irony* that I’ve never fully understood. I’ve never *apologized* to you in calling you to live in sexual purity if you are single and in sexual fidelity to your spouse if you are married. I’ve never apologized for encouraging you to speak truth to your neighbor. I’ve never apologized for exhorting you not to embezzle funds at your place of employment. I’ve never apologized for telling you how important it is that you guard your speech and that you not slander others or that you avoid crude and vulgar language.

So why is it that when it comes to your financial stewardship before God I feel the need to apologize? Why do I hesitate to urge you to be as faithful and generous with your money as you must be with your time and energy? It’s genuinely odd, is it not, that people almost always put money in a separate category, as if it’s an *untouchable, unspeakable, unapproachable* subject. Every other life issue in Scripture is fair game: our speech, our sexual behavior, our relationships with others, the way we raise our kids, and so on. But when it comes to money, I get queasy and insecure and apologetic. I don’t think that’s right. I don’t think that’s helpful to you. So I’m not going to apologize today for talking to you about your responsibility to use your money for the advancement of the mission of this church and for the glory of God.

Instead, what I would like to do is to revisit a portion of Scripture we looked at about four years ago. My aim in doing so is to identify five principles that should govern our giving. So we are going to survey 2 Corinthians 8-9 in which are found no fewer than five truths that are of central importance in shaping our attitude toward money and our giving to this local church. To make it easy for you, each principle or truth starts with the letter G: *grace, generosity, gospel, gladness, and glory*.

May I remind you that Paul’s appeal to the Corinthians was provoked by the crisis that had befallen the church in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-4; Rom. 15:25-27). The reasons for this grave situation are numerous: in addition to overpopulation, there was social and economic ostracism, disinheritance following conversion, disruption of family ties, persecution, and the lingering effects of the famine of a.d. 46 (cf. Acts 11:27-30).

The Five “G’s” of Giving

(1) Grace – We begin with the principle of divine grace as the foundation for all Christian giving. This is something that is clearly on Paul’s mind as he writes this in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

“1 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 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. 3 For they gave

according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us” (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

From a strictly human point of view, their own “**severe test of affliction**” and “**extreme poverty**” would appear to excuse them from participation in any fund-raising venture, except perhaps one that would serve to improve their own pitiful condition.

But the grace of God had been “given” or bestowed or poured out on the churches of Macedonia and that alone, ultimately speaking, accounts for their remarkable generosity toward their brethren in Jerusalem.

Notice that Paul is quick to acknowledge that *what they did in serving their brethren is the fruit of what God had done in serving them!* If the Macedonians “gave themselves first to the Lord” in this ministry (v. 5), it is because *God* had first “given” his grace (v. 1) to them. Whatever achievement on their part is praised, whatever example they may have set for others to follow, it is ultimately attributed to the antecedent activity of divine grace.

I need to say something about the use of the word *charis*, “**grace**”, throughout this section of 2 Corinthians. It is used 10x in these two chapters with a wide range of meaning. This should remind us that grace is more than an attitude or disposition in the divine nature. It is surely that, but if thought of *only* as an abstract and static principle, it is deprived of its deeper implications.

Grace, however, is not only the divine act by which God initiates our spiritual life, but also the very power by which we are sustained in, nourished, and proceed through that life. The energizing and sanctifying work of the indwelling Spirit *is* the grace of God. Therefore, grace is not something in which we merely believe; *it is something we experience as well.*

Grace, then, is a dynamic and experiential reality that empowers the human heart to look beyond its limitations and accomplish things that defy rational explanation. Grace is the power that enables impoverished and suffering saints to give when, by all accounts, they should be the ones to get. Such was the operation of grace in the giving of these Macedonian believers. And such ought to be its operation in us as well.

(2) Generosity – The Macedonians didn’t simply give: they gave generously!

Paul describes their “severe test of affliction” and “extreme poverty” and yet points us to their “**wealth of generosity**” toward the saints in Jerusalem. The very people who, at least to my way of self-indulgent and sinful thinking, ought themselves to have been the *recipients* of the generosity of others are here described as the *donors!*

Something had happened in the hearts of these people that runs counter to all common sense and cross grain to every fleshly impulse of self-preservation. It is as if the fast-flowing current in their souls had not simply been diverted but *reversed*. Something supra-human had inverted their values, turning their thinking on its head and their behavior topsy-turvy. There’s no escaping the fact that there *joy in God* undercut and severed their joy in money.

Grace had drawn them to the well of eternal life and had given them to drink of the ever-refreshing, soul-satisfying water that is Jesus Christ. To use the words of the psalmist, “You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound” (Psalm 4:7).

Money had made its promises to the Macedonians, and it all seemed so reasonable, so right. It had assured them that if they would give their hearts to what it could provide, and consider all the discomfort and inconvenience and anxiety from which it could protect them, unbroken happiness would inevitably follow. That’s the principle that drives our society and undergirds every commercial advertisement.

But they said, No. This wasn't because of some inherent virtue in poverty or, worse still, a perverted attraction to pain and distress. ***It was because grace had opened their eyes to the splendor of Jesus! Grace had imparted a taste for the sweetness of the Son of God! The alluring aroma of money and safety was replaced by the superior fragrance of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord! Grace made known the incomparable beauty of seeing God in Christ and the grip of greed was broken.***

But wait. How can poor people be ***generous***? Is Paul merely playing with words when he speaks of a “wealth of generosity” flowing out from the Macedonians to the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem? What are we to make of this?

Needless to say, if the monetary gift of the Macedonians were measured strictly in quantitative terms, it would fall far short of what other churches, including the one in Corinth, might provide. \$100 will always be ***more***, mathematically speaking, than \$10, and Paul is not so dull as to deny this obvious truth.

What made the Macedonian gift so generous, such that it could rightly be called “wealth”, was the fact that it came from people who themselves were in the very depths of poverty. When measured ***proportionately***, that is to say, in the light of how much was available to them, it far exceeded what anyone might have expected.

This oppressive suffering, far from crushing their hearts or creating despair or cultivating bitterness, became the occasion not simply for “joy” but “abundance” (!) of joy. When they chose to participate in this ministry of mercy, it was no grudging concession to a moral obligation but a spontaneous eruption of delight.

There are two other words that start with the letter “G” that are not factors in our giving: ***greed*** and ***guilt***. They didn't contribute out of ***greed***, as do so many in our own day, having been assured by some unscrupulous evangelist that giving guarantees a multiplied return. It wasn't a ***guilty conscience*** that drove them, as if great monetary sacrifice might somehow make up for sins previously committed. And it certainly wasn't because Paul intimidated them or employed manipulative tactics of pressure, fear, and guilt.

Before I leave this point about generosity I want you to see that it is more than merely a horizontal reality. It is also vertical. To see this we need to jump over to 2 Corinthians 9. Look at vv. 6-11,

“6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 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. 9 As it is written, ‘He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.’ 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God” (2 Cor. 9:6-11).

Note carefully the promise that ***when we give generously, so too does God!*** Does that mean Paul is endorsing the prosperity gospel, the idea that when we give God will give to us so that we can then afford that new home, car, or computer, or perhaps all three? No.

On the one hand, bountiful giving does result in bountiful getting. But bountiful ***getting***, as he will make clear in the verses that follow, isn't for hoarding or padding one's retirement account or moving up in scale from a Buick to a Bentley. ***It's for more, greater, effusive bountiful giving.***

“But Sam, what will become of me if I sow bountifully? Will there be enough for my needs? Will I be able to provide for my family? What about the next offering? Will there be anything left to contribute to what may prove to be an even greater cause than the former one? ***Worse still, what's to prevent my generosity from creating a financial crisis of my own?*** After all, an unexpected

downturn in the market could put me in the position of being the next person who's dependent on the church for survival."

Paul addressed this fear in v. 6, declaring that "whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." *Most folk believe the opposite: If you want more, give less. But Paul says, if you want more, give more.* But how can this be? The answer is provided in yet more detail in vv. 8-11.

Do these verses mean the prosperity people were right after all? No. One must never claim a promise without noting its purpose. In other words, we must ask the question, *to what end or for what purpose or with what goal in mind* does God cause the generous Christian steward to abound? Simply put, why does God promise financial abundance to those who cheerfully and freely give to others?

Paul's words are unequivocal and to the point. So that there might be no confusion or discord, he says it three times over.

"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**" (v. 8).

"He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed **for sowing** and increase the harvest of your righteousness" (v. 10).

"You will be enriched in every way **to be generous in every way**, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God" (v. 11).

God's promise is that he will never stir your heart to give and then fail to supply you with resources to do so. But the idea that we should give so that God will enrich us personally with a view to increasing our comfort and convenience and purchasing power is foreign to Paul's teaching. *Personal wealth is here viewed, not as an end in itself, but as a means to a yet higher goal: continued generosity to those in need.*

The principle at work in this divine scenario is that if you give generously now you will discover that God not only sustains your desire to give but will greatly increase your resources for yet more joyful and even more glorious giving in the future. The point is that *we receive in order to give, not in order to hoard.*

(3) Gospel – Now, what possible relationship is there between our giving generously and the gospel of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ? I'm glad you asked! The answer is found in 2 Corinthians 8:9 where Paul refers to the greatest motivation imaginable:

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you by his poverty might become rich."

Christ's "riches" consist primarily in the incalculable "wealth" of his eternal glory. The sacrifice of the Son will have its sanctifying effect on us only to the extent that we are in touch with the immeasurable splendor and limitless majesty of his pre-existent glory in fellowship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to his Father of "the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:5). Paul described it as being "in the form of God" and experiencing eternal "equality with God" (Phil. 2:6).

But it was more than splendor, more than radiant beauty, more than the unending adoration of angelic hosts. It was joy! The "riches" of Christ that he so lovingly forsook entailed the mutual and immeasurable delight of the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father and the Spirit in the Father and the Father in the Spirit and the Son in the Spirit and the Spirit in the Son. Each beholding the beauty of the other. Each exulting in the excellence of the other. Their eternal and energetic love for one another is beyond our capacity to grasp.

The way in which the Son of God became “poor” is perhaps best expressed by Isaiah: “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:2-3).

Finally, in what sense have we become wealthy through his poverty? Where does one begin to enumerate the riches we have in Christ? *Election* before the foundation of the world? Yes! *Forgiveness* of sins? Yes! *Adoption* into the family of God? Yes! *Justification* by faith alone? Yes! *Union* with Christ? Yes! The permanent indwelling presence of the *Holy Spirit*? Yes! Did not Paul assure the Ephesians that God has “blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:4)? Yes!

And above all else, the richest and most precious blessing of all . . . is God himself! He is our inestimable treasure. Beholding his beauty is our inheritance. Enjoying his excellency is our wealth.

But to what end does Paul speak in this way? What purpose does it serve to mention the gospel in his narrative? To stir up lethargic and presumptuous souls to give with exceeding generosity!

We see this reference to the “gospel” yet again in chapter nine where Paul closes out his argument by declaring: “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15). Is this inexpressible gift “the surpassing grace of God” operative in the Corinthians, mentioned in v. 14 (cf. 8:1)? Or is it God’s gracious gift of Jesus (2 Cor. 8:9) to us? The answer is *both*!

That said, the gift that transcends human speech is preeminently Jesus himself. Throughout his letters Paul employs every manner of speech, a vast array of adjectives, and the most vivid imagery imaginable to describe the splendor and sufficiency of God’s gift to us in Christ Jesus. But there are limits to the mind of man. There are times when our dictionaries prove deficient. When explanation fails, exclamation takes over. When words fall short, wonder ensues. Jesus is, as Paul says, “inexpressible” (the word he uses is found only here in all the NT). He is ineffable, and leaves the adoring soul stunned, speechless, and gasping for breath.

(4) Gladness – What thoughts fill your mind as you sign a check made payable to Bridgeway? When an offering is collected for support of a church planting effort in Kenya, do you give *grudgingly* (“I’m getting tired of them asking me for money; they must think I’m a millionaire”), from *guilt* (“The last time I said no, and used the money on a new car”), or *gladly* (“Praise God for this glorious expansion of the gospel where it has yet to be preached!”)?

Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 9:7 may well be the most famous of all biblical texts on the subject of giving and Christian stewardship.

“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).

Observe first that giving is a *universal responsibility*. “*Each one*,” says Paul, which is to say *every one*, should be energetically engaged in this act of stewardship (see also 1 Corinthians 16:2). No one is exempt. Indeed, why would they want to be?

Second, the phrase “as he has made up his mind” employs a verb found only here in the NT. Its focus is on *personal deliberation and freedom of choice*. Giving is never to be impulsive or careless or lacking in preparation and planning. *Think about what you are doing*. More importantly, think about *why* you are doing it. Pray about it. Plan it. Pursue it in a calculated and intentional way.

Furthermore, sowing a bountiful seed, the sort that reaps a corresponding bountiful harvest, must be *devoid of reluctance*. Others translate this word “with regret” or “grudgingly” or “out of sorrow.” Paul’s point is that *our giving must never be accompanied by a sense of loss or by the sorrow* that comes from thinking about what we otherwise might have done with the money. If your giving is characterized by grief over what you might have gotten had you kept the money for yourself, God is not pleased.

Neither is God pleased when we give *under the gun*, or to use Paul's phrase, *under compulsion*. Are we concerned about what the church treasurer will think when he issues our end-of-year giving statement? Do we give to impress pastoral leaders and others in the church with our generosity? Do we give in the same way we pay our income tax, from a sense of legal obligation or even fear of criminal prosecution? Do we give because everyone else does? Paul doesn't want the awkwardness or pressure of the moment to influence their decision. He doesn't want the weight of his apostolic authority to exert undue influence on their choice.

Finally, we must be diligent to avoid monetary regret when we give and we must never contribute under compulsion "for God loves a *cheerful* giver"!

Needless to say, *if God loves a cheerful giver, he is displeased when people give but don't do it gladly, even if their giving is generous in terms of quantity*. "When people don't find pleasure (Paul's word is 'cheer'!) in their acts of service, God doesn't find pleasure in them" (John Piper, *Desiring God*, 104).

The "cheerful" giver is the one whose heart is rapturously filled with the knowledge of the goodness and greatness of God, whose mind is captivated by the beauty of Christ, whose soul is satisfied with all that we have in him, and who, in spite of all adversity and in defiance of every circumstance, rejoices with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8). Such a giver God loves!

(5) Glory – The ultimate aim of all giving must always be the glory of God. Here is how Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 9:12-15,

"12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. 13 By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. 15 Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!"

Why would God be thanked if the ultimate and sufficient cause of this ministry was in the hearts of the Corinthians? God is thanked because he is the one who stirred and sustained their commitment to give. This, in fact, is our ultimate aim in giving: the glory of God!

Furthermore, why will they "glorify God" for the willing submission and obedient confession and generous contribution of the Corinthians (v. 13)? Again, the only credible explanation is that God is the gracious source of their virtuous acts. God had imparted the desire to give and had provided the resources to fulfill it. The giver always gets the glory.

Note also that it was "because of the surpassing grace of God" (v. 14) "upon" and in the Corinthians that this offering first took shape and was finally consummated. It is only appropriate, therefore, that "thanks" be given "to God for his inexpressible gift" (v. 15).

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus"
(Philippians 4:19).