

## Generous Church 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

So this is our fourth and final look at the Generous Life. And we're going to do that by looking at a Generous Church.

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

#### Generous Giving

Now, have you ever started something but not finished it? Like a diet, or a get-fit regime? You know this thing is good for you; you know you should do it, so you decide to do it, you resolve to do it. But soon that resolve dwindles and you never quite see it through.

Well, today's passage tells us that the same can be true for generosity and giving. You know you should do it, you intend to do something about it, but you never quite do. At least that's what happened at Corinth.

You see, the apostle Paul is collecting money for the church in Jerusalem, which is facing serious financial hardship. In all likelihood, because of their faith in Jesus, the Jewish Christians there have been squeezed out of business and sidelined in society. And so Paul has been urging the Gentile churches around the Mediterranean to giving generously to support them. And a year ago these Corinthian Christians had promised to do just that. They'd heard the need and the call and they responded. At least they had responded in word. They said they'd do their part and give to meet the need. But a year later they hadn't actually done anything about it.

And so Paul writes to them, and sends his co-worker Titus to them, to encourage them to do just that. Verse 6, 'Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.'

Now, if their failure to give was one weak area for them as a church, they had plenty of strong points, didn't there? At least, Paul says they did. Verse 7, 'you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness.' And so, he could have said, 'look it's ok, you may not be great givers, but your evangelism is pretty cool and so is your Bible teaching, and those positives cancel out the negative, so let the offering bucket pass you by.' But he doesn't, does he? Verse 7 again, 'but as you excel in everything... see that you excel in this act of grace also.'

Now what does it mean to excel in giving? What does it mean for them, or you and I to excel in generosity? Well, you know what it means to excel at your job, or in your studies, or as an athlete. It means to be right up there, to be competing with the best, to be one of the stand-out guys. So we could hear Paul say, 'you guys in Corinth, or in Westlake, you excel in all these areas of your life, as individuals and as a church, but I want you to excel, I want you to out-give everyone else.'

And in part that may be what Paul's meaning. But the word he uses for *excel* is almost identical to two words he uses to describe how other churches have responded. You see, in v1 Paul says, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia' and that's the churches at Philippi and Thessalonica. And listen to his description of their response to the needs of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem: v2, '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.'

And the word for *excel* comes from the same word as the word for *abundance* and for *overflowed*. So Paul is saying, just as you overflow in all these other areas, I want you to overflow in giving. Just as you have an abundance in all these other areas of your life, I want you to show abundance in your generosity just as the Macedonians showed an abundance of overflowing joy and generosity.

So can you see what Paul's doing? He's encouraging the Corinthians to respond like the Macedonians: I want you to follow their example. And can you see how that would translate for us. Paul might say to us, 'You're a type A personality in your work, so be type A in generosity. You live life to the full, you strive to be the best, in all these areas of your life, so live life to the full, strive to be the best, the most generous you can, in this area of your giving.'

But just take another look at these Macedonians. Because in v2 Paul says they also faced 'a severe test of affliction... and... extreme poverty.' Now if that was you, how would you respond, if you faced severe affliction and extreme poverty at the same time? Wouldn't you be tempted to think that this was a time to batten down the hatches, and close in on your self, and look after no.1? Wouldn't you be tempted to think, 'It's everyman for himself. Now is not the time to be worrying about other people whose names I don't even know. I have all these bills of my own to pay.'

So how come they responded differently? Well, look what happens when you add to severe affliction and extreme poverty, God's grace and the abundant joy that comes from God's grace. In Macedonia, v2, it '*overflowed in a wealth of generosity*.' And Paul says in v3 that they '*gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord*.' So, just like the poor widow, the very people who on the face of it seem as if they have nothing to give, gave. And they gave generously and sacrificially. And there was no arm-twisting required! Paul says they gave of their own accord. More than that, he says in v4 that they were '*begging us earnestly* for the favour of taking part in the relief of the saints.' They begged to give! They didn't want to miss out on this! They weren't about to let some *severe affliction* and a little bit of *extreme poverty* get in the way of the joy of sharing in God's generous giving!

Don't you think that's extraordinary? Especially when so often it's not extreme poverty or severe affliction that gets in the way of you or me being abundantly generous, is it? It's our wealth and our comfort.

And did you notice how Paul says that the way they went about this caught him off guard? Verse 5, 'and this not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.' Now, do you remember how in Malachi 3 the Lord called the people to return to him – to return to his generous character, before he called them to return to generosity? Well, that's exactly what the Macedonians did. They started by rededicating their lives to God. They realized the direction of their hearts mattered more than the direction of their giving. They knew that you cannot serve God and money, so they resolved to serve God.

But then, Paul says, they gave themselves to us. So, what little they had to share

they begged to share. And we know from his letters to them that their generosity extended beyond money: They were generous in hospitality, in prayer, in encouragement, in practical support. Which is why Paul doesn't say they gave *their money* to us, he says they gave *themselves*. They did whatever they could for the sake of God's glory and God's people.

And so Paul calls the Corinthians, as individuals and as a church, and he calls us, as individuals, and as a church, to follow their example and excel in this grace of generosity.

But how can we get there? What can Paul say to motivate them and us to pursue generosity with the same energy and joy, as we pursue other areas of our lives? How can we excel and become as passionate about giving generously as we are about work, or skiing, or holidays, so that overflows into the lives of others?

And let's make this really practical, because here are the Macedonians, giving abundantly, and sacrificially, to support the work of the gospel in Jerusalem – people they'll never meet, and a city they'll never visit. So wouldn't it be great if we could become a church like them? A church that doesn't just resource and meet its own needs and sees its own ministries grow, but whose abundance increasingly spills out into the lives of others – in supporting church planting, or bible translation, or training of leaders, or supporting our persecuted brothers and sisters. Just imagine the extra resources for gospel ministry we could see liberated if as a church we caught the Macedonians' vision of overflowing, sacrificial generosity!

So how does Paul encourage the Corinthians, and us, to get there?

### **Generous Grace**

Well, as we've seen, the first way he does that is by giving them the example of others. And whether it's in your homegroup, or one-on-one, we can be a huge help to one another in encouraging one another to turn our backs on getting and consuming, and instead pursue generosity. And we can encourage one another that in saying 'no' to more stuff, or more expensive holidays, or ever increasing standards of living, we are not wasting our lives when, instead, we give our wealth away for gospel work.

And to motivate that, Paul does two things. Firstly, he points them to Jesus. Verse 9, '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.'

So Jesus, Paul says, did not hold on to the wealth of his status or his position or his privilege in heaven. He didn't close his fists around that, he didn't fight to keep control of it. Rather willingly, happily, he became poor. He humbled himself, he let go of his riches and became a man. He went to the very bottom and died the death of the accursed. And why? For you! So that you who are poor might become rich. So that you and I who are spiritually like beggars in the street, alienated, cut off from God, sitting in the rags and the filth of sin, might be washed clean and clothed in robes of righteousness and lifted up and brought into the banqueting hall and made the son or daughter of the king.

That is what Jesus has done for you, Paul says. And now, do that for others. Let what Jesus has done for you change the way you see wealth. Let it change the way you see the riches, financial and non-financial, that he has entrusted to you. And then use those riches to lift others out of poverty, spiritual and material.

And did you notice how Paul introduces Jesus? Verse 9 again, 'For you know *the grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ.' And five times in chapters 8 and 9 where Paul talks of giving he talks of grace. So why this emphasis on grace when it comes to giving? Because it's only when we understand the extraordinary grace of God to us that what we will want, even beg for the honour of giving more than the minimum.

And it's only understanding grace that can make us joyful givers, which as Paul says in chapter 9 is the kind of giver God loves, chapter 9:7, 'For God loves a cheerful giver.' You see, if we don't give in response to God's grace to us in Jesus, we'll be doing it for some other reason: like guilt, or pride. And then your giving will be guilt-driven, or reluctant, or grudging, or prideful. The one thing it won't be is with the kind of self-neglectful cheerfulness that God loves. The joy that comes from knowing deep down, Jesus has given everything for me.

But the second way Paul moves them to generous giving is by considering the harvest of righteousness that comes from generous sowing. Look at v10: 'And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you...' So it's not just the Jerusalem Christians who'll benefit, you will too. And in the next chapter he spells out what that looks like: 9:6, 'Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.' and then v8, '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.' And to give a clue as to what that looks like, in v9 he quotes from Psalm 112 – a psalm which sings about the man or woman who gives generously and gets blessed as a result: v9: 'he has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'

And if you read the whole of that short psalm you'll see that out of a love and fear for God this man gives, and his family grows strong, and in the dark seasons of life light dawns, and rather than fearing what tomorrow might bring his trust in God grows and his heart is steadfast and courageous. Now why is there this link between generosity and an inner, spiritual prosperity?; between giving away riches, and growing richer in heart and character?

Because as we give, God gives more back, whether that is spiritual or financial. And so our experience of grace multiplies. And joy, and cheerfulness, and humility, and service multiply with it.

Now maybe you hear that and think, yes, but isn't that just selfish, to give so that I can get back? Well sure, if you give thinking God will give financially back to you so you can buy a bigger house or a better car. But that's not the kind of 'harvest of righteousness' Paul's talking about in 9:10, is it? This is a harvest where the Lord blesses you so that you can be even more generous and give even more away: financial or non-financial.

And just think, if the harvest we reap by sowing is to know even more of Jesus and his grace, it's not selfish to want more of that, is it? I mean, Su is not insulted if I

say, 'darling, I want my love for you to grow, I want to know you better, I want to spend more time with you. So I'm going to spend time and energy and effort and money to do.' Are all those 'I want, I want, I want's' selfish? No! They're a measure of her worth.

And giving generously so you can experience more of Jesus and his grace is never selfish, it is 'this is how glorious you are, and you are worth far more to me than money or stuff. And I gladly give these things up, for more of you.'

So as we finish, how *practically* can we grow in this?

### **Practical Generosity**

And I want to give you some suggestions that as a family we've found helpful, but they're only suggestions, not rules. Remember, the New Testament gives us a great degree of freedom as to how we do this.

1. Our giving should be **regular**. In Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth he says, 'Now concerning the collection for the saints... On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper' (1 Cor 16:1-2). So each week Paul says, put something aside to give. Now given most of us are paid monthly, it doesn't have to be weekly, it just has to be regular. And here, using standing orders with your bank are so helpful, because once you've set it up it does the regular thing for you, without you even knowing about it. And that helps fulfill what Jesus said: 'when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret.' (Matt 6:3-4).

2. Our giving should be **proportional**. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16 that we should give 'as [we] may prosper.' And in today's passage in v12, he says our giving should be 'according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.' So we don't worry about what others are or are not giving, it's for us to give in proportion to what we have. And as I've said before, whilst there is no law on giving 10% in the New Testament, personally I think that's a good place for us to start.

3. Our giving should be **thoughtful**. Look at v9 of chapter 9: 'Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion.' So you are free to decide how much to give, and within that you're going to want to decide about provision for family and pension, because as Paul says in 1 Timothy, 'If anyone does not provide for his relatives... he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever' (1 Tim 5:8).

4. Our giving should be **sacrificial**. Sacrificial, but not stupid. Sowing bountifully, not recklessly. And to help you think about what that might look like, ask yourself, 'what am I sacrificing now? What are we as a family, or me as an individual, going without for the sake of the gospel?' And personally I've found the idea that Piper calls *Wartime Simplicity* really helpful. You see, in a time of war you sacrifice, you go without to support the war-effort. You don't starve yourself, because that would be self-defeating, but you do sacrifice. And there's an example of that that I love. In the Second World War, as water rationing was introduced, King George VI drew a line around his bathtub, this much water and no more.

And because we're in a war for the sake of Christ, and the gospel, why not draw a line around your lifestyle. Decide a level of simplicity, of how much you will spend on yourself, and then give away everything, every pay-rise you receive above that. And when those pay-rises come, you don't think yippee, more money for me to spend on me, you think, thank you God for trusting me with more, so I can give more to the work of making your name great.

Or, think about increasing the % that you give away every year. If currently you give away 10%, why not increase that to 11%, and next year to 12% and so on. Or think about calculating the % on your income *before* tax, not after.

Or, as I read recently, give until it begins to hurt but not so that it does hurt your family, or your marriage or those who depend on you. As Paul says here in v13 this is not about others being eased and you being burdened. But if you have kids, involve them in your decisions about sacrifice. Let your giving be a way of teaching your children generosity and a love for missions. Explain why you go without, why you don't live or holiday as others do, why you sacrifice, because the cause of Christ is greater. Through your giving and your sacrifices, open their eyes to the world, that it is way bigger than our little lives. Teach them how wealthy and privileged they are and the responsibilities that God has entrusted to us with that. Raise them to be stewards of his money and time and their lives. Don't kill them with comfort, instead expand their vision by giving.

5. Our giving should be **cheerful**. That's the kind of giver God loves. And if you can't yet do it cheerfully, you don't need to give, wait and pray and study until you can.

6. Our giving should be **local, then global**. My conviction is that we should give first to the local church we attend, because that seems to be what Paul encourages elsewhere (Gal 6:6; 1 Cor 9:14), with collections such as the one he's organizing here in addition to that. And once you've giving regularly locally, keep on giving in ever widening circles.

7. And finally, our giving should be giving ourselves, **to the Lord**.

Everything you and I have been given is the Lord's. And that means that every frank, every pound, every dollar in our bank accounts is another opportunity to glorify God. And so, I was reminded this week (9Marks postbag) to give yourself to God is to think, how can I best use this next frank? How can I bring the most glory to God with this? Is there some need in the church? Should I spend it on a babysitter so I can take my wife out on a date, or enable us both to get to homegroup, or serve with CABES and the refugees? Or should it go towards a holiday so I, or we as a family, get the rest needed to stay in the fight? Should I put this money into this house or that apartment which costs more but means I can serve more people and be more hospitable? In Christ you're free to decide.

But when you do decide you'll be doing so because you want to give your life, your everything, to him and for his glory and for the extension of his kingdom.