

From Grasping to Generosity

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Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear your Word
and obey your will.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Background

Last week, we looked at the stewardship from consumption to contentment that God brings about in the Christian. This week we're looking at the stewardship from grasping to generosity in our lives.

In our passage, Paul is collecting an offering from the Gentile churches he planted to help the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. The purpose of the generous offering was not only to help fellow Christians in need, but to bring unity and goodwill between Jewish and Gentile believers. For Paul this act of generous giving is profoundly spiritual—in fact he identifies generosity as divine—a grace or gift of God.

Giving isn't to be offered begrudgingly, but voluntarily, joyfully, abundantly from the heart—even if we don't know how in heaven we can do it.

The Scriptures teach that generosity is not only act of service and love, but it's a way to express our worship and adoration of God. When we're generous, we're transformed into the image of Christ—who in his generosity became poor for us, that we might become rich.

Let's hear now God's Word to us from

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8: 1-9 (NRSV)

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as

you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – From Grasping to Generosity

In George Eliot's classic novel *Silas Marner*, a gentle weaver named Silas Marner is accused of a crime he did not commit. Exiling himself to a small village, he becomes a lonely recluse and miser. At one point in the story, Silas' precious gold was stolen from his property. All was lost. Neighbors told him that on New Year's Eve, if you were able to stay up and hear the old year rung out and the new year rung in—it would be a sign of good luck, and possibly his stolen gold would be returned. Silas was unaware that the townsfolk were just playing a joke on him.

As midnight approached, he thought he heard some rustling outside, so he stepped out for a look—but saw nothing. As he was about to close the door, the cold caused him to have a seizure that left him temporarily unconscious. The door of his home remained open and he was unable to resist either the good or evil that would enter his door.

When the miser's senses returned, he closed his door and turned to his hearth. With his vision still blurry, he thought he saw the glimmer of gold. "Gold!" he said to himself, "the gold stolen from me has been returned!"

As his heart beat faster, the heap of gold seemed to glow and grow larger before his delirious gaze. He stretched out his hand to grasp the restored treasure, but instead of the hard coin and its embossed image, his fingers caressed soft, warm blond curls. In utter amazement, Silas Marner fell to his knees and bent his head low to examine the marvel—it was a sleeping child.

Long-lost sensations of tenderness began to reawaken in him. Old impressions of some Higher Power presiding over his life revisited him. The miser who once grasped for gold coins now gently ran his fingers through the gold locks of the mysterious child that he would adopt and raise. The child named Hephzibah, meaning my delight is in her, would draw Silas out of his shell and selfishness, and bridge the gap between he and the villagers and his long-forgotten self of youth.

Did you know that the word "miser" comes from the same root word as "miserable"? The good news of generosity is that it jolts us out of our miserable existence.

But it's so easy, especially in our American culture, to get so wrapped up in ourselves and our small world. We feel that even all we have is not enough for us. And so we hold back and *conserve*, rather than give and *serve*.

It's the gift and grace of generosity that helps us get out of ourselves, and sets us free to live for God and for others. Generosity is an act of faith—trusting that God will supply our need so we can be an overflowing, and abundant in our blessing of others.

By God's grace, generosity opens the floodgates of heaven so we can be— rich in love, rich in faith, rich in compassion—towards God, towards others, towards ourselves. The power of generosity ensures that our lives will go beyond the parameters of our problems and the confines of our concerns.

But generosity is counterintuitive, even a bit mysterious. Jesus says to us,

*"whoever tries to keep his life will lose it,
and whoever loses his life will preserve it."* (Luke 17:33 NIV)

This is the paradox of generosity:

In giving, we receive.
In grasping, we lose.

It seems like there's a loss with generosity.

When you give—you lose money you would've enjoyed.
Giving of your time to others—is gone.
Your energy poured into someone else, is forever lost.

But this is not the case—it's the opposite of what you'd think.

Joy comes not in what we keep,
but in what we give away,
in what we share.

We grow—by giving ourselves away. In sacrificially giving away, you often receive:

*happiness, purpose, personal growth,
satisfaction, and greater endurance
to face your own challenges.*

I'm not saying generosity is a silver bullet, magic wand, or guaranteed formula. Yet there is something spiritual about generosity:

The repeated parting with money, time, attention,
emotional energy, and other resources
replenishes us, rather than depletes us.

Medical studies back up what our faith teaches. Generous acts trigger healthy chemicals in our brains: oxytocin, dopamine, and endorphins. Generosity leads to lower levels of cortisol that can bring about wear and tear on our bodies if we have too much of it. I've seen it over and over in my life and in others—generosity fosters a healthy mindset.

Generosity has blessed and rescued Immanuel from tight spots and empowered new ministries. Generosity has the power to instill hope—in individuals and communities.

Generosity ennobles the human spirit. Generosity helps us let go of grudges. Generosity helps us make peace with the hardship we're going through. Generosity moves us to help someone in need.

Generosity helps you see the world through the eyes of abundance rather than the lens of lack and scarcity. It's good for others and it's good for you. Generosity deepens our sense of making a difference in our world. It empowers us to influence our environment for good and for God.

To be generous, you have to be thoughtful and heartfelt with how you use your money and time. Generosity is a discipline and a disposition. You have to control your money, rather than your money controlling you.

The fruit of generosity creates spiritual and relational momentum in your life and relationships. The choice is ours—will we live generous lives or not? Will we be generous or ungenerous people?

The gift of generosity is that it helps us transcend ourselves and enjoy God and one another on ever deepening levels. It gives us a joy we could never experience alone.

It's good for us, good for the church, good for the world, good for all of us to make the stewardship—from grasping, to generosity.

Amen.

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