

Giving Grace

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Our Lord and our God, now as we hear your Word, fill us with your Spirit.
Soften our hearts that we may delight in your presence.
Sharpen our minds that we may discern your truth.
Shape our wills that we may desire your ways.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

Background

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 undertaking 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 when we feel the sacrifice of it. Generosity is grace in action.

The Scriptures teach that generosity is not only an 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...

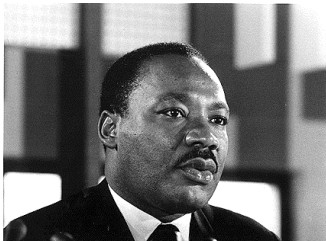
2 Corinthians 8:1-9 (NRSVue)

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia, ² for during a severe ordeal of affliction their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor^[a] of partnering in this ministry to the saints, ⁵ and not as we expected. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, ⁶ so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking^[b] among you. ⁷ Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you^[c]—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.^[d]

⁸ I do not say this as a command, but I am, by mentioning the eagerness of others, testing the genuineness of your love. ⁹ For you know the generous act^[e] 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 – Giving Grace



Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon called [*The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life*](#). He shared these words:

“There are three dimensions to any complete life to which we can fitly give the words... length, breadth, and height.

- The length of life...is the outward concern for one’s welfare.
- The breadth of life...is the outward concern for the welfare of others.
- And the height of life is the upward reach for God.

These three dimensions are inter-connected.

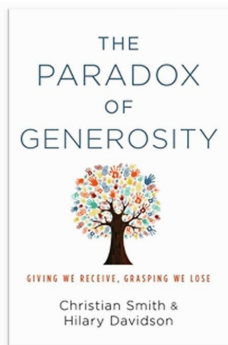
Our upward reach for God can be expressed in our outward concern for others’ welfare. Our outward reach for the welfare of others often leads to the betterment of our own welfare.”

Or as our passage mentions, God's grace can be experienced through human generosity. 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. But 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, and towards ourselves, living three-dimensional lives. The power of generosity ensures that our lives will go beyond the parameters of our problems and the confines of our concerns. 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.



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.

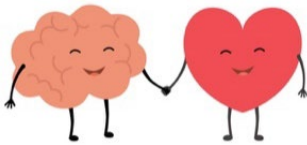
But this is not the case. It's the opposite of what you'd think.

John Maxwell tells a story about a friend of his who went on a boat trip with a few of his friends to fish for lobsters and they did quite well, in fact hauling in 125 lobsters. So when he got home, he had a freezer full of lobsters—more than enough to last him an entire year. The day after he got home, a friend dropped by the house, and he offered him a lobster. He experienced so much joy giving away his lobster. So he asked himself, who else do I know who might like to have a lobster? He got so excited by the idea of giving friends lobsters that by the end of the week, he had given away 122 lobsters, leaving only three for himself. He had such a great time giving, he didn't even mind that his supply had dwindled from enough for a year to enough for a meal. A few days later, he went into his garage and was assaulted by a terrible stench. He followed the scent to the freezer and opened it to find that the electricity had gone out, and his remaining three lobsters had spoiled. As he cleaned up the mess, he felt sorry for himself. But then he remembered all the lobsters he had given away, and it gave him great joy. If he hadn't shared his bounty with others, all of it would have been wasted. 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's something spiritual about generosity: the repeated parting with time, money, 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 the lives of 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 us see the world through the eyes of abundance rather than the lens of lack and scarcity. It's good for others and its good for us.
- 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 your 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 our lives 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, and good for all of us to make the shift—from grasping to generosity.

Amen.

[*The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life*](#)

Sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., April 4, 1967

[*The Paradox of Generosity*](#) by Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson

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