

Generous

Why Generosity? * 2 Corinthians 8:8-9

Please take your Bibles and turn with me to two passages this morning. We will start in 1 Timothy 6, but then we will spend most of our time in 2 Corinthians 8. While you are turning let me tell you that during the month of February we are going to put our study of the gospel of Matthew on hold and do a four-week series on generosity, which I have somewhat uncreatively entitled “Generous”. Yes, I am the head of the sermon series creativity department here at Harmony, which tends to lead to some uncreative titles.

Anyways, I really don’t know how a series on generosity strikes you; I don’t know if it excites, aggravates, or simply gives you a general sense of ambivalence. I really don’t know. But here is what I do know: this series will likely be very different from any other that you have heard on this topic.

That’s because there are normally two primary reasons churches talk about generosity. One, the church is in a fundraising campaign or two, the general budget is tanking and things are in crisis mode. However, here at Harmony neither of these is currently the case. In fact, I want you to look at the back of today’s handout for just a minute. This should be very encouraging. You will note at the bottom that as of today our general fund giving is approximately \$140,000 above budget. I don’t know about you, but I consider that very good. What’s perhaps even better is that God has provided over \$360,000 for Multiply: Burlington, which means that this initiative is fully funded for the next twelve months and then some. So, things are very good here financially and we can be extremely thankful to the Lord for that. I also want to say thank you to those who faithfully and sacrificially give to the ministry of Harmony Bible Church. There are a lot of great things going on around here and your gifts make it all possible.

Now, since this is the case I imagine that a logical question for many of you right now might be, “why in the world do we need to do a series on generosity when the Church is in such superb financial condition?” And you know what, that is an excellent question, a question that I am going to take

the entire message today to answer. This will serve as both an introduction to and overview of the entire series. Let me give you five reasons for this series on generosity.

1. Money is the most addressed topic in the Bible and Elders are commanded to teach about it.

First, money is the most addressed topic in the Bible and Elders are commanded to teach about it. This is a pretty simple one. There are around 800 verses in the Bible that have to do with money. Jesus himself had a particular affinity for this topic as nearly 25% of everything he said had to do with it. So, simply the sheer volume of attention the Bible gives this issue commends us to address it on a regular basis. And we are going to look at a number of passages in this series, but one I want to point you to right from the get go is 1 Timothy 6:17-19. Look at it with me:

*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. **18** They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, **19** thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19, ESV)*

Let's talk about how this passage applies to me and how it applies to you. It applies to me in the fact that as your pastor I am instructed to charge you to be generous. It's part of my job to teach on this issue.

As for you, you might look at this passage and think, well, Paul tells Timothy to charge the rich, and I'm not rich, so this doesn't really apply to me. But guess what? Pretty much everyone in this room today is rich. Let me illustrate this for you by taking you to globalrichlist.com. This is a website that tells you where you rank financially compared to other people in the world today. Let's start on the low end. Let's start with an annual income of \$16,000. That's essentially minimum wage. Interestingly enough, this is how much I made in my first year out of college. My first job was as a Christian

School teacher and believe it or not I made a whopping \$16,000 a year. That's one of the reasons Eva and I got married. She was a teacher too and so when we got married we immediately doubled our income. So, let's put \$16,000 in and see what we get. Punch that in, the computer does its work, and it shows that you are in the top 6.65% richest people in the world. Let's do another one. Let's do the median household income in Des Moines County, which is \$45,000. This puts you in the top .41% richest people in the world. Let's do one more. Let's say you reach the six-figure line. If you make \$100,000 a year, you are in the top .08% richest people in the world. There are only 5 million people richer than you, and about 7 billion who are poorer than you. Now, we could go on and on, but I hope you get the point. Most of us don't think of ourselves as rich, but that's because we compare ourselves to the ½% of the people in the world who have more than we do. However, in comparison to almost everyone else who has ever lived, we are all incredibly wealthy, and what Paul tells Timothy here in verses 17-19 applies to us.

2. Money is incredibly dangerous.

The second reason for this series on generosity is that money is incredibly dangerous. Let's look at another passage in 1 Timothy 6, this time verses 6-10:

*But godliness with contentment is great gain, **7** for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. **8** But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. **9** But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. **10** For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. (1 Timothy 6:6-10, ESV)*

There are a couple of passages we are going to look at in this series that I hope you will allow to just marinate in your soul, and this is one of them. I truly believe that we, and I include myself in that "we", really, really need this passage. We live in the wealthiest, most materialistic culture that has

ever existed. We live in a culture where money is god. If you want a great example of this you need to look no further than what happened with *Duck Dynasty* a few months ago. Phil Robertson was temporarily pulled off the show because of comments he made regarding homosexuality. The network removed him because they expected a backlash and the resulting loss of revenue. However, when the greater backlash came from supporters of Robertson, they quickly reversed their decision. This shows that even in a day where it is so important to be politically correct, at the end of the day money is still the bottom line. Money is god.

Here is the point for us. There is a huge temptation in our culture to serve the god of money, and I am convinced that we don't recognize how powerful this temptation is, and how much we are influenced by it. We know money is powerful, but we don't realize how much control it has over us and how dangerous it truly is.

But listen brothers and sisters, when it comes to money our very lives are at stake. Look back at the end of verse 10. It is through the craving for money that some people wander away from the faith and end up totally destroying their lives. And if we are not careful; if we do not constantly wrestle with what the Bible says about this issue, we could very well find this happening to us.

3. Money can be used for incredible good.

The third reason for a series on generosity is that money can be used for incredible good. This is the other side of the spectrum. Yes, money is incredibly dangerous, but it can also be used for incredible good. I hope you get this because it has the potential to be extremely encouraging and empowering. Let me point out three ways in which we can use money for incredible good.

- **For the good of our future.**

One, we can use money for the good of our future. Note what Jesus tells us in Luke 12:

Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. (Luke 12:33, ESV)

This is a very simple truth; one of the reasons we have resources now is so we can use them to invest for our future. And not the future as in retirement, but the future as in eternity. In other words, God gives us stuff now to use in a way that will allow us to experience much better stuff for all eternity.

- **For the good of the gospel.**

Two, we can use money for the good of the gospel. I'm going to try and speak plainly to you throughout this series, and especially on this point. This morning as we sit here in our nice, comfortable auditorium there are some 2 billion people on our planet that have never heard the name of Jesus even one single time. A little closer to home, today there are over 80,000 people in SE Iowa and West Central Illinois who do not know Jesus as their Savior and as a result are on their way to hell. This afternoon as we go home and eat a nice lunch over 800 million people in our world will go hungry. Tonight as we lay down in our nice warm beds there are 150 million children who will go to sleep without a mommy and a daddy. And while money is not the sole solution to these issues, it is a big part of the solution.

But listen, my desire here is not to make you feel guilty but rather to point you to the incredible opportunity these issues provide. There is great need all over the world, and with great need comes great opportunity. We have the opportunity to use the resources God has given to make a huge impact for the gospel, both here in SE Iowa and all around the world.

- **For the good of God's glory.**

Third, and most importantly, we can use money for the good of God's glory. This one really ties it all together. Let's go to 2 Corinthians 9. If you aren't there already, go ahead and get there because we are going to spend most of the next four weeks in 2 Corinthians 8-9. Let's pick up in chapter 9 verse 10. We are going to come back and study this in detail later, but right now I simply want you to see the main point:

*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. **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! (2 Corinthians 9:10-15, ESV)*

The ultimate good that generosity results in is the glory of God. When we take the resources that God has given us – that's the seed for sowing in verse 10 – and use it generously for the good of the gospel it results in those who are ministered to glorifying God for His grace in and through us. Look at verse 13 again:

By their approval of this service, they will glorify God...

Do you get what is going on here? It's huge, absolutely huge. The ultimate reason for money is so we can use it to bring glory to God. Now you might not think this is such a big deal unless you realize that for human beings there is no greater privilege than to bring glory to the One who created and redeemed us. This is the reason we exist and this is the reason that God has saved us, so that we can bring glory and honor to Him. So much more to say on this point but I will have to save for the weeks ahead.

4. Money and joy are inextricably linked.

The fourth reason for a series on generosity is that money and joy are inextricably linked. Turn back just a chapter in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 8. Follow along with me as I read an absolutely fascinating passage of Scripture, one we will study in detail next week. Pick up in verse 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 Corinthians 8:1-5, ESV)*

Can you believe what you just read? Despite being severely persecuted and extremely poor, the Macedonian Christians were abundantly joyful, and their joy lead them to be extremely generous. So joyful and generous that verse 4 says they were begging to give. There are so many things that don't make sense here. How do extreme poverty and extreme generosity go together? How can someone be extremely persecuted, poor and joyful all at the same time? How do you get to the point where you are so joyful that you beg for opportunities to give your money away? I'm actually not going to answer this right now, but I do want to point out that we really need to know, because for most of us money isn't providing joy but rather taking it away. And so one of the great hopes for this series is that God will move us from bondage to money to the joy that comes from generously giving it away. Listen, here is what I know: many of the people in this room today are stressed-out, worried, and completely overwhelmed about their finances. We live in a day when the total consumer debt in our country is over three trillion dollars.¹ Many of us are up to our eyeballs in debt and even if we want to be generous the idea seems completely unrealistic because of the place we currently find ourselves in. But you know what? It's clear from Scripture that it doesn't have to be this way. Regardless of our income we can be generous, and more significantly, regardless of our circumstances

¹ <http://www.creditcards.com/credit-card-news/credit-card-industry-facts-personal-debt-statistics-1276.php>

we can have joy in regards to money. We can experience joyful generosity. It's possible, and in this series we are going to learn how.

5. Our level of generosity reveals our understanding and experience of the gospel.

Ok, one more, and this by far is the most important. The fifth reason for a series on generosity is that it reveals our understanding and experience of the gospel. Let's go back to 2 Corinthians 8 and pick up in verse 6. Paul has just told the Corinthians of the incredible generosity of the Macedonians, and in response he encourages them to be generous as well:

Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. 8 I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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. (2 Corinthians 8:6-9, ESV)

Now, let me set the context for you a little bit. Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth was a bit complicated, to say the least. It was pretty much a love-hate relationship. Paul had planted the church several years earlier, but after he had left to continue his missionary work the church had experienced a great deal of upheaval, primarily at the hands of false teachers who had come and opposed Paul and the gospel message. In response, about a year before 2 Corinthians was written Paul had sent one of his close associates, Titus, to the church to address some of these issues and to collect an offering for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem. However, because of the problems in the church the collection had been interrupted, and so here in chapters 8-9 Paul is urging the Corinthians to complete the offering as a sign that they had come to truly understand and believe the gospel. This is clear from what he says in verse 8. Look at it again:

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

In other words, the issue here isn't about giving; it's about whether or not the Corinthian's faith is genuine. It's about whether or not the gospel had actually taken root in their lives. Paul is encouraging them to be generous as a sign that they had truly experienced the generosity of Jesus. We know this is his point because of what he goes on to say in 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.

Do you get it? Lean in with me here big time. This is the most important thing you will ever hear about money. I know that's a big statement but I believe it's true. The most important thing you will ever hear about money isn't from Dave Ramsey, it's from 2 Corinthians 8. Here it is:

Jesus became poor so that you could become rich.

Let's look at verse 9 a little more closely. Paul tells us that Jesus, who although He was incredibly rich – wealthy beyond description – gave up His wealth and became incredibly poor here on earth. The poverty in view here is spiritual poverty, not physical poverty. It's the poverty that came from Jesus taking upon Himself the sin of the world. He who was perfect, unblemished, spotless, and without fault took on our sin and before God became spiritually bankrupt. And why did He do this? He did it so that through His poverty we might become rich. He did it so that instead of being spiritually bankrupt we could be perfect, unblemished, spotless and without fault as He was. I believe the verse that best describes this comes from a few chapters earlier in 2 Corinthians. Chapter 5, verse 21:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

This is what Martin Luther called the Great Exchange. On the cross God gave us Jesus' righteousness, i.e. His wealth, and gave Jesus our sin, i.e. our poverty. He became poor and we became rich.

This means that if you are a believer you are rich beyond compare. Regardless of how much money you have in your bank account right now, whether its \$5 or \$5 billion, you are filthy rich. Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Mark Zuckerberg, they have nothing on you. Why? Because you have the one thing that is invaluable. The one thing that is actually priceless. You have the one thing that all the money in the world can't buy. You have the righteousness of Christ. And this, my friends is the only wealth that truly matters.

The reason we have to get this is that it completely transforms how we look at money. If we understand that we are incredibly rich than what we do or do not have in our bank account makes little difference. The only significance it really has is in regards to how we use it for the good of our future, the good of the gospel, and the good of the glory of God. When we recognize that the wealth that really matters is the righteousness of Christ, than we are free to be generous with the resources God has temporarily given us during this lifetime.

Now listen, in this series we are going to talk about a lot of other truths regarding generosity. We are going to talk about what it looks like to be generous, how to be generous, and what happens when we are generous. But unless you grasp what we have just talked about – unless you grasp the gospel - the fact that Jesus became poor so you could become rich - none of the rest of it will matter. This, by the way is where so many pastors, churches, and believers go wrong. They make the issue of generosity primarily about obedience, or tithing, or being financially prosperous. But that's not what generosity is about. It's about the gospel. It's about the fact that Jesus became poor so you might become rich. And so instead of encouraging you to be generous because God demands it or because it is the way to prosperity, I am going to urge you to be generous because of how God has already been generous to you.

And so let me leave you with this today. I've said it before and I will continue to say it again and again. One of my primary concerns as a pastor is that there are many people in our congregation, many people who call themselves Christians, many people who think they are going to heaven, who actually are not. Maybe they have said a prayer, maybe they have been baptized, maybe they have gone through all the motions, but they have never truly understood God's gracious offer to make them rich. One of the primary areas in which people show that they are not truly Christians is in the area of generosity. This is a bold statement but one that I think is faithful to the Scriptures. If a person isn't generous it very likely means that they have not experienced the generosity of God. Those who have received generosity are generous people. And so as we start into this series head first, I want to challenge you to evaluate your life in terms of generosity. Are you a generous person? Out of an understanding of how generous God has been to you, are you using the generosity He has given you to be generous towards others? If not, perhaps it is time to truly repent, to turn to Jesus in faith, and to, for the first time, really experience just how generous God truly is.

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