

Generous

Joyful Generosity in Practice * 2 Corinthians 8-9

Take your Bibles and turn with me one more time to 2 Corinthians 8. Today we are going to bring our four-week series on generosity to a close by answering the how question. Specifically, how do we practice joyful generosity? I want to make a note from the beginning that for the most part today is going to be the application of what we have been talking about the last three weeks. Today we will not have a primary text per se, but rather will attempt to very practically apply the things we have learned from 2 Corinthians 8-9. I hope you understand how critical this is. We have learned some very important things in this series, but unless we actually do something with them; unless we apply them to our lives and change, we really will have simply wasted our time. It's one thing to understand that generosity is about the gospel, it's another thing to allow the gospel to turn us into generous people. So, here is what I want to do. I am going to try and teach in a way that will hopefully help everyone to grow in joyful generosity. Today, regardless of where you are on the generosity scale, the goal is for you to take at least a step or two in becoming more joyfully generous. So, in that vein, I have three steps to practicing joyful generosity. Here they are: Step 1: Prepare your heart. Step 2: Make a plan. Step 3: Follow through. Sound simple enough? One more time: Step 1: Prepare your heart. Step 2: Make a plan. Step 3: Follow through.

Step 1: Prepare Your Heart

All right, let's get going by talking about how to prepare our hearts. To do so I want to share something interesting about 2 Corinthians 8 & 9. In the two chapters we have studied the last three weeks Paul gives the longest treatise on money in any of his letters. This is actually the longest single section on money in the entire Bible. For 39 verses in a row, Paul incessantly talks about money. However, do you want to guess how many times he actually uses the word money? What would you guess? 5? 10? 15? 20? Well, the answer is zero. Not only that, he never even uses a synonym for money.

Instead, he uses terms such as grace, good work, seed, ministry, and gift. Now, why does he do this? Well, its because he wants us to understand that generosity is primarily a matter of the heart.

So, you just have to get this. Before you can practice joyful generosity, you must prepare your heart. Today we are going to talk about the logistics of giving generously. We are going to talk specifically about when, where, and how to give. But before we do we must get our hearts prepared. So, how do we do that? Well, as we have seen the last few weeks, we must continually remember two things.

- **Remember the gospel.**

First, we must remember the gospel. Look with me one more time at 2 Corinthians 8:9:

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 8:9, ESV)

Now, I know you might be completely sick and tired of hearing me quote this. I've done it now about a bazillion times over the last four weeks. But that's ok, because if you get nothing else but this, then I have done my job. If you get this truth – if you truly understand that Jesus became poor so that you might become rich – I know that the Holy Spirit will make you a generous person. It might not happen overnight, but if you get the gospel you will become a joyfully generous person.

So, memorize this verse, meditate on this verse, and pray over this verse day after day after day, because as you do you can't help but become a joyfully generous follower of Jesus Christ.

- **Remember the dangers and opportunities that money provides.**

Second, if we are going to prepare our hearts we must remember the dangers and opportunities that money provides. This is really a review of what we talked about in week one. On the one hand, we must be constantly on guard against the temptation to be greedy and materialistic. We must never forget Paul's warning in 1 Timothy 6:

*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 6:9-10, ESV)*

I want to urge you brothers and sisters not to be fooled into thinking that money isn't dangerous. It's scary to note that as a whole the more a person in America makes, the less generous they are. You wouldn't think that would you? You would think the more a person makes the more generous they become, but just the opposite is normally true. Why? Because the more you have the more you want and the less generous you become. That's why the Bible tells us that the love of money can lead to our destruction. If you don't believe me take a trip to Catfish Bend Casino and watch the devastated people that leave there day after day.

At the same time, however, we also need to remind ourselves of the incredible opportunities that money provides. Do you remember these opportunities from week one? Money gives us incredible opportunities to invest in our eternal future, to make an impact for the gospel, and to bring a great deal of glory to God. And so, church, remind yourself on a regular basis of these opportunities and allow them to continually point you to the great privilege of being joyfully generous.

So, that's step one. The first thing we need to do if we are going to practice joyful generosity is to prepare our hearts, and we do so by remembering the gospel and the dangers and opportunities of money.

Step 2: Make a Plan

Step 2 is to make a plan. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 16. While you are turning, I'd like you to listen to me carefully, because I need to be really clear about something. What I am going to share with you now is what I would call practical Biblical wisdom. I am going to give you Biblical guidelines for how to practice joyful generosity. However, you need to understand that this is not "thus sayeth the Lord." I don't believe the Bible gives us specific details of how we are to individually practice joyful generosity. Remember 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart." Giving is a personal matter between a believer and the Lord. So, I don't believe there is a standard that everyone is called to. However, I do believe the Bible gives us guidelines for how we can decide how much we should give and that is what I am going to share with you now. These are guidelines for how you can determine what it means for you to practice joyful generosity. So, everyone got that? These are not commands, this is the not "thus sayeth the Lord" but rather guidelines for how to be a joyfully generous giver.

With that said, look at 1 Corinthians 16:1-2:

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:1-2, ESV)

Here we have a recording of Paul's earlier communication with the Corinthians about the offering to be taken for the struggling church in Jerusalem, the same offering that we have been studying the last three weeks in 2 Corinthians 8-9. In this passage we see that Paul is giving these believers a plan for how to be joyfully generous. From this I think we can learn the principle that most of the time our generosity should be planned and regular. This is not to say we shouldn't be spontaneously generous as well, but that we must discipline ourselves for regular generosity. Here's why; the truth of the matter is the default mode, for most of us, is not to be

generous. In other words, if we don't plan to be generous we will in actuality be planning not to be generous. Of course it would be nice if this weren't the case, but the truth is that most of us need a plan if we are actually going to be successful at anything, especially in the area of giving.

Now, let's talk in a little more detail about the contours of a plan. What issues do we need to consider when developing a plan for joyful generosity? I believe there are at least three things we need to determine.

- **Determine how to give.**

First, we need to determine how to give. By this I mean deciding if we are going to give first and pay bills second, or if we are going to do it the other way around. My strong suggestion is that you give first, be a good steward with the rest of your money and then trust the Lord to meet your needs. I base this on the Biblical principle of firstfruits, which is explained very clearly in Proverbs 3:9-10:

*Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; **10** then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine. (Proverbs 3:9-10, ESV)*

I am afraid that many of us give God the leftovers rather than the firstfruits, and what we find, after we have paid our bills and done the things we want to do, is that there aren't many leftovers left. However, we saw last week that God tells us to be generous first and then to trust Him to meet our needs.

Now, I realize that this is a stretch for some of us. It requires faith to believe that God will do what He has said He will do. But let me ask you; if you have trusted God with your eternity, can't you trust Him with the present? If God has taken care of your greatest problem – your sin and it's consequences – can't you trust Him to take care of the relatively minor problem of paying your bills? Do you remember what we saw in Romans 8:32 last week:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32, ESV)

The point is, if God has given you His Son, can't you trust Him to take care of your mortgage payment?

- **Determine where to give.**

Second, determine where to give. By this I mean we should determine where our money is going to go. Now, how do we determine this? Well, I believe the Scriptures would lead us to give to our local church first. Why? Two reasons. One, every example of giving we have in the New Testament is to and through the local church. Second, God gives the church priority and therefore so should we. Remember one of our key verses here at Harmony? Jesus says in Matthew 16:18:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18, ESV)

The thing that God is doing on this earth is building His church, and so when we give to the church we can know that we are partnering with God in what He is doing. Now, there are a lot of good parachurch and nonprofit organizations out there, and I don't want to discourage you from giving to any of them. However, God gives a priority to the church and its mission, and therefore so should we, including and especially in our giving.

- **Determine how much to give.**

So, we should determine how to give and where to give. This leads us to the biggest issue of the day, the one that is probably on most of our minds, and that is how much to give.

The first thing we need to address when talking about how much we should give is the tithe. I told you a few weeks ago that you probably would be surprised about what I had to say about tithing. So, full disclosure, I have

believed for most of my life that the Bible requires believers to give a minimum of 10% - that's what a tithe is. However, as I have studied the Scriptures in recent years I have come to the conclusion that this is not the case. Now, I know that this shocks some of you, some of you are disturbed by this, and some of you are relieved by this, so let me explain why.

First, there is a pretty big misunderstanding about Old Testament tithing. According to Leviticus 27 the Israelites were required to give a tithe to support the Levites in their priestly service. However, since Israel was a theocracy, the Levites essentially served as Israel's government. Therefore the tithe was a form of taxation and not so different from the taxes we pay to our government. In addition, the Israelites were required to pay a second tithe for their religious festivals and a third tithe every three years to support the poor. When you put all of these tithes together, required giving in the Old Testament amounted to at least 23% and perhaps as much as 25% when various other required offerings were included.¹

Second, and most significantly, the New Testament never commands believers to tithe. In fact, it says almost nothing about tithing at all. Jesus mentions it one time when He is criticizing the Pharisees for tithing legalistically. Paul never mentions it in any of his letters. Instead, giving in the New Testament is always voluntary and a matter of the heart. It's something we do in response to what Jesus has done for us.

I think it is important for us to review a couple of passages that we have studied in 2 Corinthians 8-9. First, 2 Corinthians 8:8:

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. (2 Corinthians 8:8, ESV)

So, do believers have to give? The answer is no. But do believers give? The answer is absolutely yes.

¹ MacArthur, John (2003). Pg. 279 *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary – 2 Corinthians*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

In other words, giving is not something New Testament believers are commanded to do, but rather is something they naturally do as a result of embracing the gospel.

Let's look at 2 Corinthians 9:7 again:

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

Demanding that Christians tithe does just the opposite of what Paul is saying here. Demanding the tithe leads people to give under compulsion. When people feel that tithing is a "must" they either do so reluctantly or they don't do so and feel guilty. Neither of those produce the heart that Paul is looking for here in 2 Corinthians 8-9.

In addition, demanding a tithe can actually hinder generosity. Once again this is just the opposite of what Paul is trying to accomplish. Let me explain. For some people, it would be very generous for them to tithe. For some people giving a tithe is a big chunk of their income and they make significant sacrifices to give that much. On the other hand, for others giving a tithe is not generous at all. Ten percent barely makes a dent in their budget. Do you see the problem here? If someone thinks that all that is required of them is a tithe and they can do whatever they want with the other 90%, then they are completely missing the point.

So, all of that said, we are still left with the question of how much we should give. I hope that you realize by now that I can't and won't give you a specific amount. I don't believe the New Testament tells us what percentage of our income we should give. However, I do believe 2 Corinthians 8-9 gives us two guidelines.

1. Give sacrificially.

One, we should give sacrificially. By this I mean that our giving should make an impact on our budget. There should be things that we don't do because

we are generously giving a portion of our money away. We saw a very clear example of this from the Macedonians two weeks ago. Even though they were extremely poor they gave beyond their means to meet the needs of others.

I think C. S. Lewis' thoughts on this point are especially helpful:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.

So, what am I telling you? I am telling you that if you want to give generously you probably need to stop doing some of the extra things you are doing and take the money you save and give it away. Maybe this means eating out less. Maybe this means taking fewer vacations. Maybe this means cutting back on a hobby or some of your kid's extracurricular activities. For many of us there are a number of areas that we can cut back in. Once again, I won't tell you what it should be. But I will say this: if we are only giving out of our abundance, then we aren't giving generously, even if we are tithing. Giving generously happens when, and only when it is really costing us something.

2. Give increasingly.

The second guideline for giving generously is to give increasingly. I take this from our passage last week. To remind you, look at 2 Corinthians 9:6:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Then, verse 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.

The primary point of this passage is that when we give generously, God promises to bless us with the ability to give even more generously. So, here is the practical application of this promise, an application that I think every single one of us should and can make. Whatever we are currently giving, we should strive to increasingly give more. In other words, we should strive to continually increase the percentage of our income that we are giving away.

So, let's say that right now you aren't giving anything and are really struggling to figure out how to start. I'd suggest that you simply begin by committing to give a percentage of your income, to make cuts that you need in order to do so, to trust the Lord to meet your needs, and to watch God provide and increase your ability to give a greater percentage in the days ahead. To be honest, I think 10% is a really good place to start, but perhaps for you right now 2 or 3% is all you can do. Whatever it is, commit to start today and watch God go to work.

On the other hand, perhaps you are already giving significantly. What should you do? I'd suggest you do the same thing. Commit to giving away a greater percentage of your income over the next year. Maybe that's just one percent. Maybe it's more. Once again, it's between you and the Lord. For some of us this will be a big step, and for others not so much. Whatever it is for you, look at your budget, make some cuts, trust God to meet your needs, and watch Him go to work.

Step 3: Follow Through

So, step one is to prepare your heart. Step 2 is to make a plan. This leads to the third and final step and that is to follow through. This step is the easiest to explain but the hardest to do. Let's look at 2 Corinthians 8 one last time. Verse 11:

So now finish doing it well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.

Let me warn you of a challenge we are all going to face. Hopefully, right now our hearts are agreeing that we need to put together a plan for practicing joyful generosity. Hopefully we are all ready to be joyfully generous. However, once we walk out the door today life is going to get in the way and we are going to be tempted to not make any changes - to continue with the same old, same old. If we are not careful we are going to be ready to give generously but we're not going to follow through and actually do it. We are going to fall into the same trap the Corinthians fell into. I want to urge you not to allow this to happen. Listen, we have to understand what is at stake. You do see what's at stake right? What's at stake is the opportunity to bring glory to God, good to others, and joy to yourself. To be honest, it is hard to exaggerate what is at stake. Brothers and sisters don't allow yourself to leave today and not make changes in how you are handling your money. To impress this on you I want to use an illustration I have used a couple of times before. I know that I probably am pressing the limits of effectiveness here, but I hope I can get away with it one more time.

Here's the rope. We have to remember how we handle our resources during this little time here will effect how we experience all of eternity. If we are generous with the resources God has given us here, He promises not only to bless us with more resources during this lifetime but also for all eternity.

What's more – and this truly is the most important point of the entire series – whether or not we are generous here gives us a really good indication of where we are going to spend eternity. Let me be a little more direct. If we are generous during this lifetime because of how generous Jesus has been to us, then we can have a great assurance that we will spend eternity with Him. But if we aren't generous during this lifetime we have to realize that this may very well mean we are going to spend eternity away from Jesus, in a horrific place the Bible calls hell. Brothers and sisters, which one will it be for you?

Let me be clear once again that I am not saying that generosity saves you; if you aren't being generous the answer isn't to start giving money away. The answer is for your heart to be transformed by the fact that Jesus became poor so that you might become rich. The answer is to pray that the Holy Spirit will overwhelm you with what Jesus has done for you and, as a result, make you a joyfully generous person. In other words, you need to start with step 1. You need to ask the Holy Spirit to prepare your heart. Once He has done so you can make a plan and then put it into action.

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