

January 5/6, 2019

Is it True or Not?

2019 Time, Talent, Treasure

2 Corinthians 9

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So if you're new with us, every January, the first two weeks we talk about stewardship...money...stuff. But it's always important to remind ourselves, those discussions aren't really about money; they're about a value system—they're about what matters to us; they're about what we live for. The discussion today is about something we as Nebraskans should be clear on. We have a sower on the top of our capital building. So certainly, of all people, we should understand the principle of sowing and reaping. We get that, don't we?...Don't we? (*laughter*) Well, let's talk about that. If you have a Bible, let's turn to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 9. A little bit of background on this passage: the story really starts in chapter 8. We find out that the churches in Judea, so down around Jerusalem and that area, there's been a lengthy drought which has turned into a famine. So on top of the persecution, there's a famine in the land and those churches—those believers down around Judea—they are in very difficult situations. As a matter of fact, for many it has become life threatening. And so the Corinthians, who are a long ways from that, who are not being persecuted, and Corinth which was a very prosperous city, came up with a very generous idea. "Let's take an offering and send it down to our brothers and sisters in Judea and help them out." So Paul thinks this is a great idea and he spreads the word to some of the other churches. We're told specifically that the churches of Macedonia thought this was a great idea. So this would be the church of Thessalonica, the church of Philippi and our namesake, the church of Berea. Paul specifically says in chapter 8 that these people were living in deep poverty. They were afflicted, meaning they were going through severe persecution, yet Paul actually says they begged for the opportunity to give, to be part of the offering. Paul goes so far as to say what they gave actually was *unreasonable* compared to what they had, but they begged for the opportunity and Paul granted it to them. We might ask the question, "Why would these people do that?" The driving theology is in chapter 8, verse 9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake became poor, so that through His poverty you might become rich.

(*NASB, 2 Corinthians, 8:9)

The question I like to ask whenever I read that verse is, "How could that truth possibly make us selfish...how could that make us selfish? How could that not make us generous?" I would go so far as to say, "Even if you don't have a generous, giving heart, you just don't get it. You can talk around it all day long but that's just the bottom line." He who is rich, **for your sake became poor** in order that **through His poverty you might become rich**. If that is truly understood, it has to make us generous! Why would people living in deep poverty and affliction beg for the opportunity to give? Answer: Because they got it. They understood, and it was the outpour of that core theology.

But here's the problem, and this gets us then into chapter 9. A year has passed. These suffering, poor churches of Macedonia have given generously, but to date the Corinthian church has not given a penny. So Paul sends a delegation and basically what he says is, "I'm hoping they can stir you up and remind you of this great idea you had...to follow through on your generosity." But then he goes on to say, "By the way, I will be making a visit to the churches and included in my delegation will be members of the Macedonian churches and, if we get to Corinth and they see that there's no

persecution, that you live in a wonderfully prosperous city and you have not given a penny while they, in deep persecution and affliction and deep poverty have given generously, both I, Paul, and the Corinthians will be shamed.” So that’s the heartbeat of chapter 9. He’s trying to stir them up to follow through on their commitment. I want to pick it up in chapter 9, verse 5:

So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, so that the same would be ready as a bountiful gift and not affected by covetousness.

Paul is saying, “My concern is your generous hearts have turned to selfish, greedy, covetous hearts.” It’s always interesting how people in poverty respond versus people in prosperity. When you’re in poverty, you really don’t have the option to trust in riches. So you quickly figure out your trust is in God; it’s all you have. But when we prosper, it’s easy to start trusting in our riches...in our stuff...in our prosperity, and pretty soon we cultivate the kind of selfish, greedy, materialistic hearts. It’s really important, as we talk about this, to remember this has nothing to do with how much you have—whether you have a lot or you have a little—that’s not the point. The churches in Macedonia were in deep poverty, suffering persecution, but they were generous because they had generous hearts. It’s not about whether you have a lot or a little; it’s about the condition of your heart. One of the questions I like to wrestle with when it comes to thinking about this is, “What did this cost me?” David said, “I will not give to God that which cost me nothing.” Whether it’s your time, whether it’s your talents, whether it’s your treasures, it’s a good question to wrestle with. What did this actually cost me to give?

You have celebrities that have hundreds of millions of dollars and they give some sort of gift and everybody makes a fuss. The reality is they have more money than they could spend in a lifetime, and it didn’t phase their lifestyle. There’s nothing about that that’s generous. Now stop and think about the average family at Lincoln Berean. A lot of people in town think this is just a church full of rich people because of our location. It’s good to remind ourselves, “We were here first!” (*laughter*) We didn’t move into this neighborhood; we were a farm and the rest of the neighborhood built around us. They are affluent neighborhoods, but that’s never who we’ve been. We have a wonderful mix of people who are blessed, to people who really struggle, and everything in between. But the giving of Lincoln Berean has never been a handful of rich people that give huge amounts of money. It’s just average people who make a modest income, who faithfully give and that amounts to a significant number. So I just want to remind all of us this morning, there are people sitting around you who, in order to give generously, it affects the car they buy; it affects the house they live in; it affects the clothes they buy their children; it affects where they’ll go on vacation; it affects the food they purchase. It costs them a lot. It isn’t a matter of how big the gift is, as to whether or not it’s generous; it’s what do you do with what you’ve been given? Generosity is a condition of the heart and it’s a good question to wrestle with: What did this actually cost me? How did it alter my lifestyle in some way, if I’m going to learn to be a generous person? Now I think sometimes people with less look at people with more and they think, “Well, if I had that much, I’d be generous too,” to which I would say, “No, you wouldn’t.” If you’re not generous with what you have today, you would not be generous with more. You would not! People that have more and are generous, are generous because they have generous hearts. They were generous when they had little and maybe that’s one reason God has blessed them; they’ve become generous with more. If you aren’t generous with what you have today, you aren’t going to be generous with more. You can’t give what you don’t have, so what does it look like for you to be generous with what you do have?

The other thing that I think is kind of interesting to think about is: when we look back into the history of our nation, we look back at things that were so obviously immoral, and you wonder, “How could those people have been so blind?” So for example, we look back at slavery and think, “How could anybody have ever thought that was okay?” It’s just shocking to our sensibilities. Or you think about not that long ago, women were not allowed to vote. You think, “What was wrong with those people; how could you not have seen that?” Even within the lifetime of many people in the room, we endured segregation. “How could you *possibly* have a separate drinking fountain for someone, simply based on the color of their skin?” In today’s sensibilities, that is just so wrong! So how did that happen? One explanation might be that today in 21st century America, we’re just so morally superior. I promise you that I could make an easy argument, the opposite is true. That’s not it! So what is it? Sometimes you just get so immersed in your culture you fail to see the immorality of it in the moment.

So here’s the question: In a hundred years from now, when historians are writing *our* story, what will it be? What will it be when people look back and say, “What was wrong with those people? How could they have possibly lived that way?” I don’t know. One of the things that I think it will be for sure is the abortion in our land...for sure! The more science develops, the more overwhelmingly obvious it is. It’s not a blob of tissue in the womb of a mom; it’s a *child*! It’s so obvious today, and it’s only going to become more obvious. A hundred years from now one of the things that will define us as Americans is how nonchalant we’ve been about the slaughter of millions of babies!

But second, relative to our discussion this morning, I think it will be our selfishness and greed. No nation in the history of the world has prospered like 20th and 21st century America, and yet our story will be a story of selfishness and materialism and greed, while so many legitimate needs went unmet. Now none of us in the room can change the world—but I can choose to live differently. I can choose to be out of step with that covetousness, with that selfishness and with that greed. That’s exactly what Paul is talking about with the Corinthians. His hope is that their generous hearts will prevail over the covetousness of the Corinthian culture. Why is this so important? Well, verse 6:

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Now of all people, we as Nebraskans get the imagery. A farmer goes out and sows a little bit of seed, gets a little bit of harvest, or a lot of seed, hopefully a lot of harvest. It’s the principle of sowing and reaping. The term **sparingly** is a very interesting term. It is not the idea that the person only has a little bit of seed so they can only sow a little bit of seed. The idea is much more of being driven by fear or what we might refer to as a *scarcity mindset*. Go back to the ancient world and realize they didn’t have the grocery stores and the programs and all the things that we have. Like many places in the world today, if the crop doesn’t come in, you starve to death. These things were life and death. So they’re sitting there with a bag of seed, and the temptation is, “We need all that, or we’re going to starve to death!” But there’s also the realization that if we just consume what we have, we will die. We have to take some of this seed and we have to sow it, so that we get more seed in order to survive. But the idea of sparingly is because of a scarcity mindset; because of fear they’re only going to sow a little bit of seed. So what happens is, at harvest time they only get a little bit of harvest, and if you do that long enough, eventually you’re going to starve to death. There has to be the faith and the courage that every farmer has: that in the spring I spend a lot of money. I

buy this seed and I sow it in order, that in the fall, there is a bountiful harvest. So the verse is clear, isn't it? Nobody's confused on this, are we? Right? We believe it. Do you believe it? If you sow sparingly, what are you going to reap? Our tendency is to spiritualize all this and think, "Well, God doesn't mean it. He's a God of grace and He'll just do His thing no matter what." That's not what it said. It says what it says! So many Christians want to sow sparingly or not at all but expect a bountiful harvest, and they go out in the bare field year after year in the fall and there's nothing there. And then who are they mad at? God! "God, what's the deal? I know I didn't sow anything. I know I sowed sparingly, but I wanted a bountiful harvest!"

Now one of the problems is the prosperity preachers have so abused this language and so abused this concept, if you listen to them—and I don't recommend that you do—that's all they talk about is sowing a seed, and what they mean by sowing a seed is to send them money, but the promise is: "Then you will become rich!" You give to get. In the prosperity gospel, the one who prospers is the preacher. It's not a biblical message. The problem is for us as conservative, evangelical Christians, we are so fearful of that language that the pendulum swings all the way to the other side and we simply won't accept the text for what it says. You tell me, "What does it say?" This isn't confusing. Some people want to just spiritualize it all away. There's no question that the subject is money. That's the whole topic of chapters 8 and 9. What does the text say? So then you wrestle with, "Is it true or is it not true?" You tell me, "Do you think God's a liar or is He trying to tell you the truth?" If you have not cultivated a generous, giving heart, how can you tell you think that verse is true and live that way? There's a long list of Christians who will struggle their entire Christian lives all the way to the grave. They'll never get it...never get it! Every spring they sow sparingly; every fall they harvest sparingly, and they don't connect the dots. They just think God has been unfair. Verse 7:

Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

This isn't something you should be manipulated into. This isn't some big emotional thing. On these weekends, we always make sure the offering is *before* the message. Nobody wants to work you over and then pass the plate. It's not what we're doing. We don't want to give that way. We don't want you to give **grudgingly**. If that's how you feel about it, keep it. When you go to some sort of a fundraising event and they work you up into a deep emotional, manipulative moment and then ask for your money, I think a red flag should go up. That's not what we're about. Giving should be thoughtful; it should be prayerful; it should be considering, "God, what do you want me to give?" We don't want you shamed or guilt-ed or manipulated into this, but there's some very important principles you need to understand in order to make your decisions. I don't know what you give. If I happen to be looking at you in a moment when I say something, it's not because I know something. I'm not calling you out. Maybe it's your own guilty conscience getting the best of you. I don't know what you give. That's between you and God. But we want you to learn to give joyfully. Now there are some of you in the room this morning, you think that is ridiculous religious talk because of your own selfish, greedy heart. You think this idea of a *joyful giver* is nonsense. Nobody gives that way! Hey, I've got news for you. There's a whole bunch of people sitting around you, and their hearts resonate with verse 7. They have discovered the joy of generosity and they would never go back to being selfish and greedy again. They find true joy in giving. These people are going to get to the end of their lives and as they look back, one of the things they will know is they have been a joyfully generous person and there's deep satisfaction and joy in that.

One of the things that we have at Berean is a benevolent fund. It's basically a fund for those that, for one reason or another, are in a specific season of need, and we want to be able to help them out,

to get through that. There are always people that work the fund, and we work really hard to kind of weed those people out; typically they aren't even attenders. But there are people that for one reason or another find themselves in a difficult situation in life and just need a little help—and often we offer the help. But for many people, it's very difficult to receive—it would be for me—and often they struggle to receive the help. And usually the conversation that I have with those people is, “You need to understand that people find great joy in giving and helping you. It's joyful to them to help you in your hour of need to get back on your feet.” In 2018, roughly a quarter of a million dollars went to people with specific needs out of the benevolent fund in order to help them through a difficult time.

There's a whole bunch of people sitting here this morning that find great joy in knowing they're part of changing the country of India. They're part of seeing lives radically transformed through the ministries of Lincoln Berean, and they find great joy in that. At the end of their story, their stuff will be rusty and in the junkyard, but the investment into people's lives lasts forever, and people find great joy in that generosity. It's the joy of giving! But there's more to it than that. Verse 8 is one of the most amazing verses, I think, in the New Testament because the language is so over the top. Verse 8: Why is this so important?

And God is able, (That word able is from where we get our word dynamite; God is so powerful.) **to make all grace abound**, (That means overflowing.) **to you, so that always** (not sometimes) **having all sufficiency** (not some sufficiency) **in everything**; (You cannot make a more comprehensive statement than that.) **you may have an abundance for every good deed**;

The idea is this. What does the text mean when it talks about **sowing bountifully** and **reaping bountifully**? It goes far beyond money. When your trust is in God, when He is your sufficiency, (The word **sufficiency** is a Greek word that connected with the stoics, and the stoics carried this idea of being self-sufficient.) no matter what they faced in life, they were going to make it because they were self-sufficient. Paul takes this term in the New Testament and just redefines it as *Christ-sufficiency*, like we've been studying in Hebrews—*Christ is enough!* So then, why would we sow bountifully? Why would we find great joy in giving? Because He, Christ, has the power to cause the grace to overflow to us, in order that we might have **all sufficiency**, always, **in everything**.

Now stop and think about that for a moment. One of the huge problems we have as Americans is we think money solves all the problems. The truth is money solves very few problems. So good for you; you have a bank account full of money. What can you do with that? You can pay your bills. Good for you! Let me just ask you an honest question, though. “How does that help you when your marriage is falling apart?” “How does that help you when your doctor says your child has cancer?” “How does that help you when you live with chronic pain everyday?” “How does that help you when you're battling mental illness?” “How does that help you when your teenager is rebellious?” “How does that help you when your world is falling apart and you're in sadness and despair?” “How does that help you?” There's actually very little that money can do to address the things that matter to us in life. That is why so many wealthy people struggle with despair and depression and fear and anxiety. What if we could change all that? What if, no matter what's going on in the world, no matter what's going on with politics, no matter what's going on with the economy, no matter what's going on in your health, what if every night you could put your head on your pillow and in peace know that everything is going to be okay, why would you know that? Because you've *learned to*

trust God! If you don't give generously to God, don't tell me you trust Him; you don't! If you don't trust Him with your money, you don't trust Him—and that's what creates all these negative emotions. What if I actually learned to trust Him and found my hope in Him and lived for those things that matter? Jesus said that, "*Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is.*" What if His grace would abound to me, overflow to me, and I go to bed at night no matter what's going on in my world and I know that I have *all sufficiency for everything, all the time*. Wouldn't you want that? Why are we so passionate about getting people to be generous with what they have? It's not fundraising. That's not what it is. We want you to experience the sufficiency of Christ *always, in everything*. But the Bible's very consistent with this message: If you don't figure it out with your money, you're not going to get it. It's like the most accurate barometer in your world—*always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance...why?...to stockpile more in the bank?* Oh, wait a minute, that's not what it says. That you *may have an abundance for every good work*. In other words, the more generous you are with what you have, the more God gives you, so you can be more generous. This is one of many places where we differ from the prosperity gospel. You don't give to get. That's just spiritualized greed. But rather you understand that: *I get in order to give!* My heart is to be generous. If God gives me more, I want to give more. My heart is to be generous to serve other people. Verse 9 is a quote from Psalm 112:

**“HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR,
HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER.”**

What that psalm is talking about is, in the ancient world a farmer had very clear boundaries of the edge of his field. The farmer had the option of going out and over-seeding the boundaries of his field with the understanding that everything that was outside of the boundary belonged to the poor. Now it's helpful to understand: Nobody harvested outside the boundary and *delivered* it to the poor. The poor were expected to come, work hard, and harvest it. But, "If you need food, here it is. Come get it; it's yours!" So what the psalm is talking about is the righteous—the Tzadek—would over-sow his field and, because of that, God would bless him with more. Therefore he would over-seed the field even more in order to help more of the poor. God would bring more; he'd over-seed even more. The idea is as God gives, we'd become more generous. Verse 10:

Now He who supplies seed to the sower (which is God) and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; (meaning you can just help more people) you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, (meaning all generosity) which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. (Vs. 10-11)

It's the key to a thankful heart. God has called us to be generous people. The rest of the chapter basically says, "This will be our witness to the world." In the midst of a selfish, greedy, covetous culture, our light will shine when we emerge as something different. Other than the rest of the culture, we emerge as joyfully generous people. *He who was rich for your sake, He became poor in order that through His poverty you might become rich.* You tell me, how does that make us selfish and greedy? Truly understood, it can only make us a generous people!

As we close this morning I want to give you some resources just to help you a little bit. There's a table on the 100 level with several resources. One is a book called *God and Money*. We recommended this a couple of years ago—in my opinion, the best book out there on the topic of

God and money. It's written by two Harvard MBA graduates. Excellent! We're selling it from the publication center for \$5. It's a massive discount, but we just want to get it into people's hands. I think before last night, we had sold about 750 copies, and people say it is such a helpful book. It's a great resource!

Second, on the table are these *Generosity Devotionals*. It's a 28-day devotional around the topic of generosity—not just money, but a generous life! These we are giving away for free; it's an excellent resource. Feel free to help yourself.

And then the series that we've talked about a couple of years now, is the video series called *Money Talks*. We're just in the twilight of a *Decade on Purpose*—the last year—and the big thing has been, “We want to live for the things that matter!” Primarily the biblical teaching on money—the main focus—is it's a way to measure and assess your own value system—what you're actually living for, what really matters to you! So that's the heartbeat of this series. If we're going to finish the decade well, then take some assessment and try to determine what are you actually living for? What really matters to you? This is meant to be done in a group—six weeks' videos and then the manual—so grab some friends and take six weeks to do it. You can purchase copies at the publication center or you can just jump on the website and get it for free.

There are a couple of simple budgeting classes coming up, and we also offer personal financial coaches. If you say, “My finances are just a mess,” we'll assign you a personal coach to help you figure it out and get back on track. We can pretty much offer you whatever you need, but you have to want it. You have to have a desire in your heart to be a generous person. If that's the case, we will help you get there.

He who was rich, for your sake He became poor in order that through His poverty, you would become rich! How does that not make us generous?

Our Father, we are so thankful for Your abundant generosity to us. God, there are so many people in the room this morning that know this; they live this; they have found the joy of generosity. I'm just so thankful for them! But, God, there are others who need to take some significant steps of faith and learn what it means to be a generous person. Lord, give them the faith and the courage they need to take those steps of faith. In Jesus name, Amen.

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