

January 1/2, 2022

The Joy of Generosity

2 Corinthians 8 and 9

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Well, Happy New Year. It's good to be together! Any kids in the room here this morning with us? Raise your hand. Yes, it's good to have you guys in here with us. It's kind of a special, unique Sunday, but awesome to have us all together this morning. Let me ask you a question, as you've no doubt probably been reflecting over this past year, looking over the things that took place in your life. Do you believe that this past year you've become a more joyful person? As you look over this last year—2021—that you've just ended, and now are starting in 2022, do you feel like you've been a more joyful person this year than the year before? It would stand to reason, if God's joy is unending, and He gives us His joy—we share in His joy—then our joy can increase each year. Maybe I'll ask you another question. As you look over this last year, do you feel like you've become a more generous person this past year? Maybe those two are a bit more tied together than we might realize. That's what we're going to look at this morning.

If you've got your Bibles, you can join me in 2 Corinthians, Chapter 8. I'm going to be reading out of the NIV version today, for the younger people in the room this morning. But let me give you a little bit of context before we dive into the middle of this book of the Bible. So, in Jerusalem, a Jesus movement had started. Jesus had come, lived a perfect, sinless life. He had died on the cross and was raised again. And then he pulled together his disciples at Pentecost, and they're filled with the Spirit, and they started to go out and share this gospel of hope. And it spread like wildfire. The message continued to spread throughout Jerusalem, and then even greater into Judea, and all over the Roman Empire. It continued to grow and grow, and history tells us that two decades after the church was started, a severe famine hit the Judean region. This especially impacted the church in Jerusalem. A lot of poverty and hardship was taking place there. In fact, Acts, chapter 11 records this in verse 27. It says, *“During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each, according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.”*

So one of those places, one of those churches, was Corinth. It was in modern-day Greece, a major trade area. The church in Corinth heard about the famine, and they had tons of resources. And so 1 Corinthians, chapter 16, tells us that on their own accord, they decided they wanted to help out the church in Jerusalem. Now this was completely countercultural at this time. Think of two worlds that just hated each other, and yet now, these Gentiles—these non-Jews—are looking out for the Jewish people in Jerusalem, and actually wanting to give their resources up to help them during this famine. So Paul gives them a little plan. In 1 Corinthians he says, “Okay, every week, when you come together, gather your resources and start to collect a relief offering.” Now it's not like you could just send a wire transfer at this time, right? So, they were going to gather it up, and he would come by later to receive that offering and take it to Jerusalem, which in and of itself would be a pretty significant task. But time lapsed, and since that time, Macedonian churches, and other churches around that area had already started collecting. And Paul gets word back that the Corinthian church has fallen behind. For whatever reason, their offering is not ready. Maybe they

just had a tough year in fishing that year. Maybe they had had a tough year and they decided to spend their money on a vacation instead of actually giving it to the offering. Maybe they had just had time lapse, and while they had a good thought to do at the beginning, they just never took action on it. I'm not sure what it was.

But Paul then, in 2 Corinthians, writes back to them and says, “Hey, I'm going to be coming through and I don't want you to be caught off guard. Because if I come and you're not ready, that would be so disheartening for you, because as a church in Corinth, you were the one that initiated this idea and you wanted to do this. It'd be disheartening for me, Paul, because I've told the other churches about your generosity. It would be disheartening for the church in Jerusalem, because this would greatly help and be appreciated by them there.”

So that's where we pick it up in 2 Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 1. It says:

Now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (*NIV, 2 Corinthians 8:1-2)

Now several times in chapter 8 and chapter 9, you're going to continue to see this word **grace**. It's going to continue to describe this offering, that they were taking up. Grace is getting something that I don't deserve, something that I am not capable of getting on my own. But grace can also be this special passion, this passion that matches God's heart. So, He's given each one of us a unique gifting in the personalities that we have, in the passions that we have, in our skills and gifts that we have. And oftentimes He will take His heart and match it up with our heart, and use our heart to display His heart through our generosity, through our gifts. So, there's an author of grace, and we see that in verse one through these Macedonian churches, and that author is God. God had given **grace** to the Macedonian churches, something they didn't deserve, that they weren't capable of doing on their own, and they were able to give. Now the churches that he's talking about were Thessalonica and Philippi and also Berea; and Philippi had especially fallen on hard times. Extreme poverty! In fact, in verse 2, he gives us this equation, right? Did you see that? **severe trials, extreme poverty** equals what? Severe trials plus extreme poverty equal depression? It equals stinginess? It equals a lack of joy? No! What did he say? It equals an *overflowing, joyful heart from these Macedonian churches*. And it also equals **rich generosity**. It's a reminder to us that generosity is a product of our heart, not a product of our circumstances. Did you get that? Every single one of us has the ability to be generous, because generosity is a product of our heart. It's not a product of our circumstances. In fact, within their deep poverty, they still were generous. That means that they were a rich kind of poor people. There could also be a poor kind of rich people, that lack generosity in their lives. Verse 3 goes on to say:

For I testify that even they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. (Vs. 3-4)

They gave what they could. In fact, they laid everything out on the table and said, “Okay, here's all that I have. And in proportion to all that they had, they gave, not just a piece of it. They didn't just toss in a few bucks. According to *all* that they had, they gave. But then not only that; they

gave beyond that. They started stretching their sacrifice, to take out things that they needed, to give to the church. Oftentimes, when you and I give, we look first at what we need, don't we? And then we assess and say, "Okay, what can I give outside of this, so my life is not impacted."

But that's not the giving that he's telling us the Macedonians did. In fact they made sacrifices to give. It tells us that ordinary people, when impacted by God's grace, can live extraordinarily generous lives. Again: ordinary people, when impacted by God's grace, can live extraordinarily generous lives.

I remember when my wife and I were planning to go plant a church. We started to fundraise and raise some support for that church. And at first, it just seemed really awkward. I felt like I was going and just asking people for money. And that just seemed awkward until somebody told me something that changed my whole thinking on it, my whole posture on it. They said, "Josh, don't ask for money. Tell them about what God is doing, and that you're inviting them to join the team and give them that opportunity. If that's not something that God latched on their heart, that's okay. God will provide. You can go on to someone else and share that same opportunity. And those who God strikes up a passion for, will join in and give. And so my wife and I sat down and we started making a list of the people that we thought we should go present this opportunity to. And on the list, there were several people with lots of resources. And we just figured, "You know, they'll probably join in and give a lot to this." And then there were a few other people on that list that we almost thought, "We don't even want to share this with them, because they don't have very many resources, and we don't want this to be a burden on them." But we just felt compelled to present it to everyone, and whoever wants to join in, can. You know what we were constantly amazed by? Those that we least expected to give, gave, and they gave generously. Because ordinary people, when impacted by God's grace, can live extraordinarily generous lives.

That's what's happening to the church in Philippi, as they give out of their own desire and above and beyond. Verse 5 goes on to say:

And they did not do as we expected: (They blew Paul away.) They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then to us, in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion, this act of grace on your part. (Vs. 5-6)

So Paul urges Titus to go back. He had helped them start a system of giving in Corinth. Titus himself wants to go back and help them come to completion in Corinth with what they desired to do. But did you see what they said? He said, The Macedonian **church gave themselves first of all to the Lord**. Isn't that where generosity starts? It starts by saying, "God, all that I have is Yours. Would you please use it? Everything that I have is Yours; please use it! Verse 7 goes on to say:

But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see to it that you also excel in this grace, of giving.

Because God's nature, the very essence of who God is, is that He's generous. He's a giving God. *"For God so loved the world that he gave..."* In 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us that when you and I

follow Jesus Christ as our Savior, we become a new creation. He gives us a new nature, a nature that reflects that of our Creator. Our God is a giving God, and He desires for us to be a giving people. And Paul continues to encourage them to excel, to grow into that nature, to that giving nature, because Christians wouldn't be very helpful Christians if they didn't reflect God's character and give in the world, would they?

Maybe you remember that kid's story, *The Giving Tree*, this tree that would give of all of its resources. This boy would come along, and it had an apples, so it shared its apples. And then he wanted to build a house, so it shared its branches so he could build a house. He wanted to build a boat, so it shared its trunk so he could build a boat. It gave everything down to the point where it shared its stump as a seat. A helpful tree, a giving tree. But what if that tree hadn't shared anything? What if it wasn't a giving tree? What if it was an ungiving tree? Maybe it would look a little like this.

(Video of a reading of “The Ungiving Tree” to children)

A selfish tree wouldn't be very helpful in the world, would it? And a selfish Christian wouldn't be very helpful in the world either. Then he goes on to say, in verse 8:

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that through his poverty, you might become rich. (Vs. 8-9)

God's very nature is to give, and He desires for that to be reflected in His children. I wish we had time to go through the entire chapter, but we just don't this morning, so please skip with me over to chapter 9, and to verse 6. Paul starts to get really practical with some ways that we can give as believers. Verse 6 says this:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

All of a sudden, when we hear this, we often think of those televangelists that just want your money, so you can gain your wealth and your desires that way. There is a truth, that as you are generous with God, He does give you more resources, but not for your own good. He uses the resources to funnel through you into what He's doing. It's not this equation that as I sow this, I get stuff for myself. No, it's joining in the work of God.

It's kind of like if I have a garden, and I go out and I plant seeds into my garden. The more seeds that I plant in the spring, the more plants will come up; the less seeds that I plant, the less plants will come up. So God is saying, “Sow lots of seeds of generosity.” Why? So that His righteousness can be spread throughout the earth. In fact, in verse 7, he goes on to say this:

Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

He's telling us that our giving should be thoughtful. It should be intentional, should be joyful, and it should be motivated by God. It should be prayerful, in line with His heart. What it shouldn't be is *reluctant* or *compulsive*. "I feel like I *have* to, or I'm going to feel bad...so I'm going to give," or, "Man, I really don't want to give, but I'm going to give anyways." Why? Because that just sucks the joy out of giving.

Now, I could tell you a lot of good stories about giving, but I'm going to tell you one that's a little embarrassing. Back when I was in college, I got to go on a missions' trip with several other college students. We got to play on sports' teams and travel around Mexico. We would play a team, and then afterwards we would share the gospel. We had other musicians that were traveling with us, and they would play music, and then we would share the gospel. We got to travel all over; it was a blast. We're having a great time and having a great time with the people there and were able to share the gospel. I remember one of our stops. We went to an orphanage; we had taken these gifts, and we were having a party with them. It was a great time! It was a really simple orphanage, not a lot there. I remember feeling this little boy come up and tug on my shirt and then point to a bracelet that I had. You could tell pretty soon that he wanted the bracelet on my arm, but I didn't want to give it to him. So, I just pretended like I didn't know Spanish, which wasn't really that far off. Even though I knew exactly what he wanted, I kind of walked away. Later on he found me again, kind of tugged on my shirt and pointed to the bracelet. Again, I kind of found my way out and, just as we're leaving, I see him again, and he's kind of looking at me. So I reluctantly pull this bracelet off and give it to him. Now you may remember there was a trend a long time back with a bracelet. You started seeing these bracelets on NBA players and on celebrities, and everybody had these bracelets. The fact is, it was the same one that I was wearing that day. And this bracelet had four letters on it. Can you guess what letters might have been on that bracelet? W W J D! I'm sure Jesus wouldn't have wanted to give a bracelet in an orphanage, right? So I wasn't that far off. No, I reluctantly gave it, and you know what? It sucked all the joy out of giving. You know why? Because I thought it was "mine".

But when we realize that all of our stuff is God's, we can give joyfully, because it's way more fun to give God's stuff than the stuff we think is mine, that we hang on to. In fact, Bob Goff said it this way. "I used to think that God just wants my stuff, but now I realize that my stuff is His stuff." We see this in Scripture. Psalm 24:1 says, "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.*" James 1:17 says, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above.*" So, we're not supposed to give reluctantly or compulsively.

I wonder, "Do you view your stuff as *my* stuff, or do you view it as God's stuff? When our kids were young, we would constantly tell them, "These are God's toys that He's allowing you to play with. So share them generously." When we realize that the things that we have are really God's, there's so much more joy in giving them. He also says at the end of this verse, that we're not to **give reluctantly, or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver**. Now we know from the rest of Scripture that this isn't that God has more affection for you if you give. His giving is not based on your performance or anything that you can give. The word **loves** here, you could picture as *delights*. *God delights in a cheerful giver*. In fact, when you give, and you give joyfully, you give cheerfully, it brings God joy. And you know what else? It brings you even more joy as well.

He goes on to verse 8:

And God who is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need.... (...you will get wealthy and rich and be able to get whatever you want, right? Is that what it says at the end of this verse? No, it says,) **You will abound in every good work.**

Like he's trying to make a point—there are a few *all's* in there. God has **all** the resources that we need to accomplish His work here on Earth. His desire is that we would be a funnel for those resources, that our lives would cultivate His goodness and spread it on to others around us. In fact, he goes on to talk about that in verse 9, where he quotes from Psalm 112:

As it is written:

**“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.”**

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

(Vs. 9-10)

He's talking about *the supplier who supplies bread for food*. In other words, God is saying, “I will take care of you. I'll take care of your needs, but as you constantly live generously, I will give you resources also, to be able to live generously. Why? **For your righteousness!** It helps us to understand what righteousness means when we look at this verse. Righteousness is not just a moral standing. Righteousness is a standard of a right relationship. It always takes relationships for righteousness to unfold. So, it's the idea of a character that is demonstrated through a relationship. Or, I could say it this way: a behavior that works itself out in a relationship, to put things as God intended them to be.

So I could be a righteous father. What that means is that I am using my behavior, my actions, my resources, in my relationship with my kids, to put that relationship in place as God intended it to be. And that gets very specific in each one of our lives in different ways. Maybe, at times it means that I'm sitting down and I'm giving my time reading to my kids, or I'm going into the backyard to play. Other times it means I'm protecting my kids or providing for my kids. It is a righteousness that continues to work out a right relationship as God intends that to be. It's the same thing in your work, in the righteousness of your relationships. It's putting things in the way that God intended them to be. And so, as God blesses us, He gives us resources that are to be used to put things as He intends them to be. Verse 11 says:

You will be made rich, (or maybe your translation says be enriched.) You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Why does He do this? So that you can be focused in every step, along with God, in what He's doing, and use His resources, funneled through your life, to accomplish His work in this world. Why? So that others will thank Him, so that others will give Him praise. Paul goes on to say that later in verse 13.

So I wonder: Could 2022 be a year where you become a more generous person, a more joyful person? I think one of the ways that starts is not by waiting to become rich or have more, but it is taking a look at everything we have right now, and just saying, “God, it is Yours. I'm ready to take what You've given me and live generously right here, right now, starting today.” And every day when I wake up, I continue to say, “God, it is Yours. You can use Your stuff however you'd want.”

God, thank You for being such a generous God. Thank You for being such a giving God. Thank You for the way that You invite us to join You on mission. Thank You for Your graciousness to us. God, I pray, as we look forward to this year, God, would You help us to become a more generous people, a more joyful people. God, would You help us to start each day by just giving You what we have, and looking for ways to serve others with the resources that You have so richly blessed us with? What a good God You are! We pray this in Jesus' name Amen.

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