

2Cor. 9:6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

September 17, 2017

Living Generously: Generosity from the Heart

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

Luke 18:9-14

Today begins a series of sermons about living generously. This is not a series about money, though. It is about a way of living as a response to the gracious generosity God has shown toward us. This way of living *includes* financial generosity, but only because it includes generosity in every aspect of our lives.

The apostle Paul talks about this kind of generosity in our reading from Second Corinthians: *Each of you must give as you have made up your mind (literally, "heart"), not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* There are two kinds of generosity: that which is done because we feel obligated to do so, and that which is done because we can't help it. One is about giving so that God is happy with me. The other is about giving because I've received such generosity from God. The first kind of generosity is outward – we may not really want to, but we know we're supposed to. The second kind of generosity bubbles up from somewhere inside and overflows into the way we share our time, our forgiveness, our faith, our compassion, everything. It is what Paul calls giving "cheerfully," as in, "God loves a cheerful giver."

The Greek word that is translated "cheerful" is *hilaron*, from which we get the word "hilarious." Hilarious doesn't just mean funny, it's more than that. One dictionary defines *hilarious* as "arousing great merriment, boisterously joyful."¹ Paul isn't saying that God loves a giver with a smile on their face; he says that God loves a *hilarious giver, God loves a boisterously joyful giver.* That's the contrast Paul is drawing for us:

¹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/hilarious?s=t>

on the one hand, a grudging giver because everyone else is and I don't want to look bad; on the other hand, a person whose generosity is joyful, who has so much fun being generous that it even makes God smile; makes God turn to the angels and say, "Now, there's a Christian who gets it, who gets *me*."

Remember the parable of the prodigal son? Well, whoever made up that title – it isn't in the Bible – got it wrong. It really ought to be called the parable of the prodigal father. The word prodigal means "recklessly extravagant." The reckless extravagance of the younger son who blows his inheritance on wasteful living is nothing compared to the reckless extravagance of the father showering grace on his son. He runs to meet him, throws his arms around him, puts on a huge party – why? Because his selfish son lost everything and came home flat broke. Who is the prodigal one, the recklessly extravagant one? I'm thinking it is the father more than the son.

Of course, the parable is about the recklessly extravagant grace of God, the hilariously joyful grace of God. Paul says that God loves it when we show that same hilarious spirit of generosity. In the next couple of months, we're going to see what that cheerful, prodigal, hilarious generosity looks like in several different areas of life, but, today we're looking at where this generosity comes from, and for that we look at a less familiar parable. Luke tells us who Jesus' audience is, because the audience is the reason for the parable. This is a group of people "*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*"

Have you ever thought to yourself, "Well, I may not be perfect, but, I'm not as bad as..." whoever it was at the moment you were thinking about at the moment? Maybe somebody who had committed a crime; maybe somebody guilty of a level of immorality

just unimaginable to you; maybe somebody like the younger son who demanded his share of his inheritance and then lost it all on wasteful living. I mean, I may not be perfect, but I've never done *that*. Then, perhaps, this parable is for you.

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." We probably don't see the full measure of contrast between these two because we don't understand what either a Pharisee or a tax collector was in Jesus' day. Since Pharisees were often so resistant to Jesus, we think they were bad people. They weren't. In fact, they were model church members. They read the Bible, went to church, gave at least ten percent of their income. They were the people of which we ministers wish we had a church-full. They said yes when the officer nominating committee called; they taught Sunday school; volunteered for everything, and tithed. Every church's nominating and finance committees could use a few more Pharisees.

The opposite of a Pharisee was a tax collector. We're not talking about the IRS here; tax collectors were traitors; betrayers of their nation. They were Jews who worked for Rome taking money from their own people to give to the empire holding their nation captive, and getting rich. And betrayed their nation for one reason: the money.

So these two men, the model citizen and the traitor, go to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prays, *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."* Do you hear this? He isn't really thanking God at all. He's making sure God sees what a great guy he is. He isn't really giving God credit for his righteousness; he's boasting about it. "God, you've got your thieves, rogues, adulterers, and tax collectors like this guy over here; and then you've got me. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of

my income. You're welcome."

His righteousness is based on his own behavior, and he's proud. He looks down on everyone else. He may write big checks to his church, he may agree to serve on ten committees, but he is not a generous man. He's a proud man who judges everyone else by how they compare to his self-righteousness.

But over there is a man who is going through a spiritual crisis. He stands in the back because he knows he doesn't deserve to be in God's presence. He won't look up because he is too ashamed. He simply beats his chest – an act people did as a sign of their grief – and says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" What he is saying is, "*God, I've done nothing to deserve your love, and everything to deserve your rejection. I need your help because I can't pay for these sins. If there is going to be a relationship between us, it is going to have to be based on your canceling the debt between us because the debt is too high; I don't have it in me to pay for these sins.*"

When he asks God to have mercy, he is asking God to pay for his sins, because he can't. The debt is too huge. He throws himself on the mercy of God, meaning that God has every right to exclude him, to say, literally, to hell with you, but if there will be a relationship, it will be because God pays the price of his sin.

On the other hand, the Pharisee is basically saying, "Thank God I'm not like all those sinners out there – thieves and rogues and adulterers, and that tax collector over. They owe you so much. But me, I'm paid up, God. I don't owe you a thing." This is the definition of a **self**-righteous person: one who thinks they have paid their own way into God's kingdom. They owe God nothing. They don't need God's mercy. They are paid in full. They've got a room waiting for them in heaven, and they have already paid for it

themselves by their good deeds.

Jesus says, “I tell you, the tax collector went home right with God and the Pharisee did not.” Why? Because God looks at the heart, and in the tax collector’s heart God sees a man who knows his true spiritual desperation, and in the Pharisee’s heart, God sees a man who is so proud he has no idea how lost he is. He’s too busy looking down on everyone else to see the spiritual poverty in his own heart.

Tim Keller points out an important truth when he says that there are two ways to reject God and be your own savior and lord. One is to live profligately, the other is to live self-righteously, and the mark of a self-righteous person is looking down on other people. *And self-righteous people are never hilariously generous people.* They may write big checks, but there is no joy. They may forgive someone who wronged them, but they do it because they’re supposed to. They may welcome a stranger, give of their time, or fix a meal for the homeless, but there is no hilarity in it. Because they are not doing it out of gratitude for the recklessly extravagant grace God has showered on them; they are doing it because they think it shows what good people they are; they can pay their own way into heaven by praying and fasting and giving a tithe and fixing a meal. They don’t need to beg God to be merciful to them, like the thieves and rogues and adulterers and traitors. They’ve paid their own way, thank you very much.

The first place to look if you want to get a fix on how generous you are is not your checkbook register. The first place to look to see how generous you are is not your calendar to see how busy you are, or how many committees you are on, or how many people you have forgiven. The first place to look is in your heart: do you give your time, your money, your talents, your forgiveness reluctantly or out of compulsion? Or do you

give those things joyfully, cheerfully, hilariously, recklessly, extravagantly, because you know you are a sinner who is saved only by the hilarious, reckless, extravagant grace of God who paid your debt on a cross on a hill named Golgotha two thousand years ago?

Each of us must give as we have made up our heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a hilariously, recklessly extravagant giver.