

Generosity and Justice
Deuteronomy 15:7-11 &
2 Corinthians 8:1-15

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Deuteronomy 15:7-11

⁷If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. ⁸Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. ⁹Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. ¹⁰Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷But since you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you - see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

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

¹⁰And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion

of it, according to your means. ¹²For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

¹³Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, ¹⁵as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

PRAY

“All I really need to know I learned in Kindergarten...These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Do not hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Do not take things that aren’t yours. Say you are sorry when you hurt somebody. Flush. Wash your hands before you eat. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you...Take a nap every afternoon.... When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.” (Robert Fulghum, excerpt from book by the same name, p. 6-7)

That about sums up much of the basic social contract that is taught to us as children. I still recommend milk and cookies and a daily nap, at any age! But the first thing mentioned is the focus of the message today: Share everything.

Simple. If I have more than enough, why not share it with another who does not? And if I am in the position of need, I would be most grateful if another shared with me. Wouldn’t you?

This summer our 10-year-old granddaughter wanted to earn some money. After completing some chores that she worked on over a couple of days, she received a twenty-dollar bill that she was eager to spend. The two of us made a quick trip to a craft store where she picked out some art supplies that totaled nine dollars and some change.

Back in the car, we were exiting the parking lot onto Pacific Highway. As I pulled up to stop before making the turn, Lily called out: “Stop, Nona!” She quickly rolled down her window and handed her ten-dollar bill to a man standing on the corner with a sign. “I think he needed than money more than I do”, she told me. This spontaneous act of generosity warmed my heart. It also humbled me.

It also illustrates the central message of the scriptures today. Generosity originates in the heart of God. This is made obvious throughout the Bible. God's love and generosity cannot be separated; they are integrally related.

"God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son..." John 3:16.

We see this connection between love and generosity in the God's gift of Jesus! Paul writes in Romans 8:32.

"God, who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with Jesus, graciously give us all things?"

We are recipients of amazing grace in and through Christ. As such, we are called to share generously not only the spiritual, but also the material, physical, and monetary gifts that God has bestowed on us as well.

This text in Deuteronomy focuses on how to treat the poor. We need to be reminded that in ancient times there was no middle class as we know it today. A minority of people were rich and powerful, controlling most of the resources. The majority were poor, hardworking, living a subsistence lifestyle. Furthermore, built into the covenant were stipulations regarding land ownership, debts, and the freeing of slaves.

The commandment to keep the Sabbath had far reaching impacts. On the 7th day of the week, one rested. Every 7 years, land reverted to the original owners, slaves were freed, and debts forgiven. Every 50 years (7x7+1) the Year of Jubilee was celebrated. In addition to the above, the land was to lie fallow and God promised to provide abundant harvest in the prior years to the end that the all the people and the land would enjoy a year sabbatical! (You can read about this in Leviticus 25.) This explains the reference to "the seventh year" in Deut. 15:9.

The point: God is the owner of everything. We are stewards or managers of what God provides. Therefore, we are instructed in Deuteronomy 15 to not be "hardhearted" or "tightfisted" but to...

¹⁰Give generously to the poor and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. ¹¹There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

The emphasis on generosity - openheartedness and openhandedness - is a reflection of three things:

- 1 God is openhearted and openhanded, exceedingly generous toward us.
- 2 God is a faithful provider.
- 3 God wants us to reflect God's own character and follow God's example.

Jesus himself taught us to pray: *"Give us today our **daily** bread."*

We are instructed not pray for a full pantry but for food for this day. God will provide today. Tomorrow will be another day. God promises to show up for us and provide for us each day.

This is linked in Paul's mind to the Exodus story and God's provision of manna during the wilderness wanderings - which was provided daily. Do you remember what happened if the people collected more than needed for that very day?? The extra manna would develop maggots! (The only day that one could collect twice as much was the day prior to the Sabbath, so that no one needed to "work" on the Sabbath. That manna did NOT develop maggots!)

This was an exercise in trusting God to provide exactly what was needed, each and every day, one day at a time. This is what Paul refers to when he writes: ¹⁵as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little." We should give in proportion to what we have.

The causes of poverty are complex, and they vary by region within the US and globally. (To address this adequately is beyond the scope of this message.) However, the Bible acknowledges the reality of our human condition: The poor will always be among us. Therefore, those of us who possess some means, have a responsibility to share. Period.

Last week we carefully examined the meaning of three Hebrew words:

Hesed - Lovingkindness/mercy/compassion

Mishpat - acting in justice, treating all equitably, giving all their due/their rights.

Tzadeqah - Righteousness, "right relationships" expressed in fairness, equity.

What is the relationship of justice and generosity? Isn't generosity - or sharing what we have - an act of charity not an act of justice or righteousness? The Bible itself identifies gifts to the poor as "acts of righteousness" (Matthew 6:1-2).

To give generously is an act of justice because:

- 1 It acknowledges God is the owner of everything; we are managers or stewards of God's gifts. It would be a sin to think of my bank account and possessions as mine alone. Even the ability to make money is a gift of God.
- 2 Giving generously is not an option for God's people, it is a commandment. When we give, we are living in compliance with God's law and will (Deut. 15:10-11), and we are reflecting God's character.
- 3 To give generously is an act of justice because the act of sharing redistributes more equitably the gifts of God.

If we help the poor, are we enabling them/their condition? That is, by our help are we encouraging them to remain in poverty? The answer to that depends on specific situation. BUT we cannot use this for an excuse to do nothing!

It is not ours to judge. It is ours to give generously. Personally, I would rather error on the side of helping someone, than not. The reason? In Matthew 25, Jesus tells a story about dividing the "sheep and the goats", the "righteous ones" who will enter the Kingdom, and those who will be eternally punished. The difference between the two? Those who gave food, water, showed hospitality, provided clothing, visited the sick and the incarcerated. *The ones who did this, did **not**, in the moment they were helping, recognize that they were helping Jesus himself! They were simply responding to people in need. Period.*

No judgement. No excuses. Generous justice.

Of course, we need to be wise in our stewardship. If we are uncertain as to how to help, we can support local non-profits that are ministering to the needy in our community. On a global scale we can support reputable non-profits such as World Vision, Village Steps, Faith in Action - each of these through student sponsorship, provide for basic needs (food, clothing) and education. Overall, if there is a single factor that contributes most to eradication of poverty, it is getting an education. But as noted before, the causes of poverty are complex.

Prior to Covid, the largest contributing factor to poverty in the US was unemployment. The second, failure to pay/to earn a living wage. Due to this pandemic, many of our neighbors who were previously employed are now out of work. Government stimulus checks are long gone. Unpaid rent and bills are accumulating. This is where we find ourselves today.

What can be done??

There are no easy answers. But we start with where we are. You and I, as individuals, have resources. Calvary has resources. How might God help us be really creative in leveraging those resources to assist those suffering economic hardship due to Covid 19? Pray that God will guide us to act.

Presently there is little point in keeping money in the bank. Interest rates are so low. Much bigger dividends await if we can come up with some creative ways to invest in our community now!

It is a matter of justice....It is a matter of obedience! It is a matter of sharing the abundance of what God has given to us. God so loved the world...and God so loves the people of Enumclaw! Right here where you and I live and are called to serve.

What does generous justice look like here and now?

I am anxious to hear your ideas. God has prepared us for such a time as this.

What is God calling us to be and do? Perhaps you have heard these lyrics:

A bell is no bell till you ring it

A song is no song till you sing it

And love in your heart wasn't put there to stay

Love isn't love til you give it away

Likewise, the gifts of God are given to us...

Not to hoard and save for "someday" when they are needed today by our neighbors. When did we see Jesus and give him food, water, clothes or compassion? How shall we respond to the "least of these"- Here-Now??

This is generous justice: sharing the gifts of God with those in need.

PRAY