

Extravagant Generosity

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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One preacher said he loved to preach about giving—“It makes the generous smile and the stingy squirm!” I realize that a lot of people have the perception that the church always talks about money or always asks for money. And some “ministries” do seem only interested in taking in money. We aim to be more balanced and accountable here. But we do recognize that money, possessions, resources and the decisions related to them are part of our lives. And we believe that discipleship, following Jesus, includes everything in our lives. We seek to bring all of life under the lordship of Jesus—and that includes finances.

This message is the last in our series on “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations.” We can connect these five practices to our vows of church membership. When we join the United Methodist Church, we promise to participate in the church’s ministries by our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. The five practices help us live out that promise: radical outreach and hospitality (witness), passionate worship (presence), intentional faith-development (prayers), risk-taking mission and service (service), extravagant generosity (gifts).

Why *extravagant* generosity? Robert Schnase describes it this way:

Generosity describes the Christian’s unselfish willingness to give in order to make a positive difference for the purposes of Christ.

Extravagant Generosity describes practices of sharing and giving that exceed all expectations and extend to unexpected measures.

Fruitful congregations thrive because of extraordinary sharing, willing sacrifice, and joyous giving out of love for God and neighbor. Such churches focus on the abundance of God’s grace and emphasize the Christian’s need to give rather than the church’s need for money. In the spirit and manner of Christ, congregations that practice

Extravagant Generosity explicitly talk about money in the Christian's walk of faith. They are driven to be generous by a high sense of mission and a keen desire to please God by making a positive difference in the world. (*Cultivating Fruitfulness* 79)

Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians are all about giving to a particular collection. Paul was collecting an offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He was asking new converts in gentile regions to contribute to a relief fund for the older believers in Jerusalem, who were suffering because of a famine and because followers of Jesus in Jerusalem were being persecuted.

A year earlier, the Corinthians had gotten excited about this collection and pledged to support it. Paul used their enthusiasm and generosity to encourage other churches to give. The other churches gave generously and now Paul is using them as an example for the Corinthians. Paul wants to see the Corinthians complete what they said they would do, to follow up their good intentions with action. Throughout these two chapters we find a theology of giving and some principles we can use.

First, we see that *grace is at the heart of giving*. The Greek word *charis* is in these chapters nine times. It's usually translated "grace." But it can also mean gift or blessing or thanks or generosity.

God gives grace and we receive it. Then we return it as we give ourselves and our offerings to God and to people. Our receiving God's gift of grace moves us to return grace with thanks and praise. This is the basis for all the other principles we'll look at here.

Paul even refers to the actual offering as *charis*—a grace or gracious work, the grace of giving. He also calls the collection fellowship, sharing, service, and ministry. Extravagant generosity puts us in the flow of God's grace. It's sharing and participating with God and God's people. It's a way of serving.

When we get in on God's way of giving in grace, we get perspective on our money and possessions. Instead of being possessed and driven by our possessions, we possess and manage them as God's stewards. Giving sets us free. We find some insight on how to give in what Paul writes here.

Give yourself first. Look at 8:5, "...they gave themselves first of all to the Lord and then by the will of God also to us." The first response to God's grace, the first offering we make is to give ourselves to God. Make your life an offering to God. Remember Rom. 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." One expression of giving ourselves is giving our money. Our money is a form of us.

Another principle for giving is *to give as we are able*. In a sermon entitled "The Right Use of Money," John Wesley urged the early Methodists to "earn all you can"—legally and without harming yourself or others; "save all you can"—don't be wasteful; "give all you can"—that is, give everything to God. Wesley's advice was that we should give to God by taking care of our basic needs and our family and then the needs of others in ever-widening circles.

Different generations have different perspectives on money. If you lived through the Great Depression, or grew up with people who did, you're probably more conservative and avoid debt as much as possible. People in my generation and younger have tended not to be as concerned about debt. Though people like Dave Ramsey are teaching us not to get tangled in debt. Individual experiences and personalities affect how we view money and use it. For some people, getting out of debt and learning better financial management are important steps toward becoming extravagantly generous. Others may need to take a little more risk and see giving as a way of showing trust in God.

Paul says in chapter 9 that God is able to provide for us and to enable us to be generous. As we figure out what to give, we need to count on God's generosity and provision.

Schnase tells about six members of the Finance Committee of a small congregation who were faced with the challenge of paying for an unexpected air conditioning repair bill of \$465. The church had already used up its maintenance budget for the year. Account balances were low. The members of the committee discussed options for forty-five minutes. Should they borrow the money? Should they postpone a utility payment?

Should they use money budgeted for other ministry? Should they do a fund raiser?

As they became more frustrated, one of the members suggested they stop discussing for a bit and pray. So they prayed silently and asked God to show them another way.

After they prayed, one of the members said, "We all realize that any one of us could write a check for the full \$465 and it wouldn't make any major difference in our lifestyle, comfort, or financial security." Then she got out her check book and wrote a check to the church for \$465. She invited anyone who wanted to join her to add their check, with the surplus going to children's ministry. By the time they were done, the air conditioner bill was paid and they had an additional \$1700 to start a new children's ministry program (*Five Practices* 111-12).

Paul also says that *our giving should be willing, free and cheerful* (see 8:11, 12; 9:7). Paul was not commanding the Corinthians to give to this relief work. He was urging them to follow through on their commitment and to be generous in response to God's grace.

In the OT, God commanded the people to give. That legislation was to ensure abundant generosity. And, even in the Law, giving often came in the form of feasts and festivals and celebrations. It also showed concern for people without any means of support. The community of faith was commanded to help them.

In one of his critiques of the Pharisees, Jesus said not to give up the tithe, but also not to neglect justice and the love of God (Luke 11:42). In other words, though tithing is important, it's no substitute for character.

Paul goes on to say that *if we give willingly, the gift is acceptable according to what we have*, not according to what we don't have (8:12). That is, God sees the "heart" gift, not the "hand" gift. One Sunday, during the offering, a man pulled a dollar out of his wallet to put in the plate. Someone in the row behind him handed him a twenty dollar bill. So he put it in the offering. The person behind him leaned forward and said, "That was your twenty. I picked it up off the floor." Our motive and our attitude are more important than what we give. What makes the gift acceptable is not the amount given, but the goodwill of the giver. That's what Jesus

meant when he said that the poor widow who gave two small coins gave more than all the others in the temple that day. “For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (Mark 12:44).

In the last part of chapter 9, Paul makes two major points about giving: *God enables generous giving and generosity glorifies God*. We don’t have it in ourselves to do all that God calls us to do. We don’t have the resources to live out the covenant that God has made with us. But God has more than enough resources. God gives us grace. God makes us able to live up to the promises we make.

God enables our generosity to meet needs and so that there will be equality (8:13-15). The point of Christian giving is not to make one poor so another will be rich. It’s for everyone to have enough for their needs. There are a lot of people who don’t have enough. And God blesses us so that we can be a blessing. God gives to us so that our needs are met and so we can help meet others’ needs.

God also enables our generosity by multiplying our giving. That doesn’t mean that God rewards our giving by multiplying our own resources. Paul is not promoting a get-rich quick scheme. Paul’s point is that God will give the means to be generous. We can sow generously (freely, cheerfully) in the confidence that God will give an abundant harvest. As we give, God enables us to give more and always to have what we need.

Another way to understand God’s multiplying our giving is to see that the effects of our gifts are greater than our gifts. There’s more going on than what we are doing. God is at work behind the scenes—in, through and above what we do and give. God multiplies our giving in others’ lives. In the economy of God’s kingdom, whatever we give is taken and used beyond our imagination.

In one church, a long-time member and proud grandfather stood at the baptismal font with his family for the baptism of his baby granddaughter. Another infant from another family that was new to the congregation was baptized at the same service. Following the service, the two families intermingled at the front of the church as

they took turns having their pictures taken. At one point, the mother from the new family needed to get some things out of her bag, and the grandfather from the other family offered to hold her baby. Other church members were mixing and greeting, and several commented on the grandfather with the baby, and he found himself saying several times, "Oh, this one isn't mine; I'm just holding him for a minute."

Monday morning the grandfather called the pastor at the church office and said he wanted to see him right away. The pastor assumed the worst, thinking somehow the long-term member was upset about something from the day before. When the grandfather arrived at the church office, he told the pastor, "I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about how to do that." The pastor was stunned and couldn't help asking about what brought the grandfather to this decision. The older man's eyes grew moist as he said, "Yesterday I realized something while I was holding that other baby, the one from the family that just joined the church. I kept telling people that wasn't my child, but then it dawned on me that he was part of my family, part of my church family, and that I have a responsibility for that little boy just like I have for my own granddaughter. I've been a member of this church for more than forty years, and in God's eyes, I'm a grandfather to more than just my own. I've taken care of my own children with my will, but I realized I also need to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children."

Those who practice extravagant generosity have a God-given vision and faith to plant seeds for trees whose shade they will never see. (Schnase, *Five Practices* 107-08)

Because God is the Source, God gets the glory. Our giving not only helps supply the needs of God's people, but it also overflows in many expressions of thanks to God (9:12). God gets the glory as those who give and those who receive give thanks and pray for each other.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! God has given himself to us. Jesus gave his life for us. God continually blesses us with his grace. All of our giving is grateful response for what God has given.