

Extravagant Generosity: The Heart of Giving

John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 8:24

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One preacher said he loved to preach about giving—“It makes the generous smile and the stingy squirm!” Let’s smile together and maybe squirm a little as we talk about extravagant generosity.

Why *extravagant* generosity? Bishop 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)

God is a giving God. We see in John 3:16 that God shows love by giving. God gives himself in giving his Son, Jesus. We are created in God’s image. We’re redeemed to be God’s people and the Holy Spirit is restoring us to God’s image. So giving is part of who we are. As we grow, we can become more giving, we learn the truth that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). I remember as a young person at Christmas just tearing into my presents. Sometimes I noticed that my parents and grandparents waited to open theirs. They just watched the kids opening

ours. At some point, I started doing that. It became almost as much fun to watch our kids open their gifts than to open my own—*almost*.

The other verse we read (2 Cor. 8:24) comes in the middle of a section where Paul talks about giving. 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 weren't treated very well in Jerusalem then.

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 see 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, 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. "They gave themselves first of all to the Lord and then by the will of God also to us" (8:5). 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 Romans 12:1, "... in view of God's mercy, 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. And, as Paul says in 8:24, "show the proof of your love" through giving.

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 now we're learning to be. And, 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 exceeded its maintenance budget for the year, and account balances were dangerously low. The lay members of the committee included a retired salesman, a banker, a teacher, a housewife, a small business owner, and an insurance agent. For more than forty-five minutes they discussed options. Should they borrow

the money, postpone a utility payment, make an additional appeal for money on Sunday? Should they reallocate budgeted resources from other ministries? They considered other money raising options, such as a rummage sale, a bake sale, a dinner. The thought occurred to go to one of their wealthiest members and ask for a special donation, even though the member was inactive and had not shown much inclination to help in the past. As the meeting went on, frustrations grew. Good solutions eluded them.

Finally, the teacher just shook her head at the impasse they had come to. Smiling, she suggested they simply stop talking and thinking so much and pause for silent prayer to see if God would provide another way. The others went along. After a few moments of silent prayer, she looked around the room at her friends and fellow church members, and she said, "We all realize that any one of us could write a check for the full \$465 and it would not make any major difference in our lifestyle, comfort, or financial security." With that, she pulled her checkbook out of her purse and wrote a check for \$465 to the church. Then she said, "Anyone who wants to join me can add their check, too, and we'll earmark the surplus for children's ministry." Three others followed her lead, and two wrote checks for \$200 and \$100.... The result of her inspiring and generous leadership? The air conditioner repair bill was paid, and the children's ministry had an unexpected \$1695 to launch a new initiative to teach the faith to the next generation! (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* 111-12)

Paul 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.

Now in the Old Testament, God commanded the people to give. They were to give the first tenth of their produce to the Lord and there were other offerings throughout the year. This 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

who had no 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 (giving 10%), 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. 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. "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—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 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.

Most of what we give to the church stays here to fund ministry and meet the church's needs. A portion of what we give is our share in the United Methodist connection. Some of that covers administrative costs, but much of it is for mission—reaching out, spreading the gospel, and meeting people's 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 is 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 it

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.