

Radical Generosity

Proverbs 3:1-10

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Luke 21:1-4

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Today the Scriptures call us to a life of radical generosity which will enable us to bless others and in turn experience God's blessing. As we see in Paul's methodical instruction on generous giving in 2 Corinthians 9, our giving and receiving are based on this profound dynamic promise in verse 11, "You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us."

Paul has put a big plan before the churches throughout the Greek world across Asia Minor, Macedonia down to Achaia. He calls them to give generously to help the poor back in Jerusalem in a time of famine, is a cause. This is a cause he is impassioned about for a long period of his ministry as he travels and writes throughout the Greek and Roman regions, seeking to inspire many in these outlying congregations to become involved. Reference to the collection for the poor in Jerusalem is found on a number of occasions throughout his letters and in the Book of Acts. He who has been called out as the Apostle to the Gentiles does not forget those Jewish believers back in the place where it all began. In the 8th and 9th chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul in essence sets up a friendly competition between the churches of Macedonia and the churches of Achaia, including Corinth, playing one off the other as he praises each to the other for their generosity, and inspires them to now follow through on what they had previously begun to do a year ago. To the Corinthians he praises the efforts of the Macedonians. To the Macedonians he praises the efforts of the Corinthians.

Some scholars suggest that Paul is so strongly motivated for the poor in Jerusalem because of his need for being accepted by the Jerusalem Church. When he first became a follower of Jesus he had been on the way to persecute the church in Damascus. After his conversion he was brought to the leaders in Jerusalem where there was well-placed fear that he was not authentic, that he was a spy seeking still to destroy the movement. Only after Barnabas stood up for him was he accepted as truly a follower of Jesus, whose life had been transformed by the Gospel. Then Paul was led by the Holy Spirit out to the far corners of the Roman Empire where he was uniquely gifted to spread this message of what God had done for all people in Jesus Christ. But always he had this gnawing sense of needing to prove himself to the leaders back in Jerusalem. Maybe that was part of his passion for the poor there.

Or maybe his concern for the poor is more simply understood as a matter of our interconnectedness, concern for fellow believers in their hardship everywhere, the sense of mutual responsibility the Gentile churches bear for the hurts of all parts of the body, including the Jewish Church in Jerusalem. After all, because of Jesus Christ these churches are all one, connected as arms, legs, hands and feet are all part of one body. So when one part hurts the whole body hurts. Maybe that was at the core of his concern.

In any case, Paul in his letters frequently emphasizes this offering, the need that it be received by the famine afflicted poor in Jerusalem, and the need that it be given by the churches of the Greek region. Generous giving and receiving are essential. Something we all continually have to remember as we grow in faith and as we then seek to fulfill practically the teachings of Jesus Christ today.

At the heart of all stewardship is our need to learn to grow radically generous. We do not come by this naturally, but as a gift of God. We are by nature selfish people. By grace we learn selflessness. Consider a little baby and the self-absorption that sweet smiling infant has for his or her own needs to be met. Growing on to childhood, we focus on getting our own needs met, our own pains relieved. “I, me, mine,” are by nature our favorite words. We all are concerned, and rightly so, about our basic needs for food, clothing and shelter. And so is God. God cares for us and provides for us because of God’s great love for us.

But the truth of life under and with God is that we most fully receive what we need when we are most giving. John Buchanan puts it like this:

“At the heart of the Gospel is a radically counterintuitive idea – that you save your life, claim your life, fully live your life if you figure out a way to lose it, to give it away. It’s a consistent theme in the story of Jesus. To a wealthy young man, a seeker for meaning: ‘Sell it all and follow me’; to disciples not quite sure who he is and what he wants of them: ‘Save your life and lose it: lose your life for my sake and find it.’ And of course, this poor widow – now a powerful symbol of the whole story, an icon through which we see the mystery and reality of a self-giving God – she gave all she had.

Counterintuitive and countercultural: a culture that over and over, every day of our lives from morning to night, in all the media, television, newspapers, magazines, in our mail, in the increasingly thick and glossy catalogs clogging our mailboxes and the U.S. Postal Service, on the Internet, on the sides of buses, billboards, and in every shop window – the culture inundates us with a promise: ‘Buy this and you will be happy. Buy this and you will be alive.’”ⁱ

What I am trying to get across today is the simple but profound and paradoxical truth that givers are liverers. That it really is better to give away than to hold onto. That as we give, we do in fact receive, we become life enhancers. As the famous prayer of St. Francis concludes, “For it is in giving that we receive, it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Keep in mind that simple but profound image of the distinction between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. These two bodies of water, found at either end of the nation of Israel are connected by the Jordan River. Yet they are as different as possible. The Sea of Galilee is full of life, a fisherman’s paradise, the image source for drinking water

and irrigation for Israel in Jesus' day and today. The Dead Sea is simply that, lifeless, inert, dead – nothing lives there, it is the most salty body of water in the world and shrinks a few feet lower every year.

The difference between the two is that the Sea of Galilee is a giver, a channel. Waters flow down into it from the snowy mountains of Lebanon in the north, and that water moves on down rivulets to Galilee on through the Jordan River in the South. This water is full of life. The Dead Sea however, into which the Jordan empties, goes nowhere. It is all take. Water flows in, but none goes out. It is a dead end and the water simply dissipates. No fish, no life there. It is good only to delight tourists who make mud baths on its banks and float on its surface. They cannot sink because of its high salt content.

The reciprocal truth of giving and receiving comes across in the third Proverb. Probably the most famous single proverb is 3:5 and 6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Here is the foundation for all our life of faith, to place our trust in God and not rely finally on ourselves, and so discover God guiding our path. This trust is like riding a bicycle. You keep peddling; you keep moving forward, you keep your balance. You stop. You fall.

Following on that, two verses down comes 9 and 10, with practical application to our material resources, “Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine.” The writer makes a direct link – if we bring to God our first fruits, not our leftovers, not what remains after we have satisfied all our other wants and desires and commitments, but our first fruits, the first of the harvest, the first of our income, set that aside up front, then there will be – he promises - full barns and overflowing vats of wine, abundance.

The 8th and 9th chapters of 1 Corinthians offer us the clearest most comprehensive guide to our stewardship of any place in the Bible. Here Paul gives practical specific instruction to this Church he has founded and dearly loves about how they can participate in meeting the needs among the Jerusalem poor, and how in so doing, they will receive much. He praises the Corinthians for their generosity and he instructs them practically in how to follow through with their generosity. Here are progressive step-by-step instructions. Underlying is that claim of verse 11, “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity which will produce thanksgiving to God through us.” Here are Paul's steps toward growth in radical generosity in our giving.

I

First a radically generous giver must BE PREPARED. Paul tells them to follow through on their eagerness in giving by getting ready in practical ways. Here is why we have stewardship seasons and people giving witness, simply because with all that pulls at us, busy schedules, deadlines at school and work, our many obligations, we must take time to prepare our gifts for God's work.

To this end Paul is sending a team of fellow believers to Corinth to help them along, organizers, collectors, inspirational preachers. “I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready as I said you would be.”ⁱⁱ Paul has been boasting to the Macedonians about how generous the Corinthians in Achaia are, even as in chapter 8 he has boasted to the Corinthians about how generous the Macedonians are. Now to be sure he is sending brothers, trusted accountants, inspiring preachers, to bring about the promised gift, to help them follow through on their good voluntary intentions.

In point of fact we do need time to prepare our giving. We need people to remind us, testimonies to inspire us, letters to encourage us, cards of intention to help us focus upon our needs and our opportunities for giving. Paul calls us to arrange in advance for “this bountiful gift that we have promised.”ⁱⁱⁱ

II

Second, a radically generous giver must learn to be just that, GENEROUS. Selfishness comes naturally. Generosity is learned. He or she would learn generosity. She is looking to make not a minimal token gift but a significant gift that really means something and makes a real difference, Jesus illustrated this in his story about the poor woman who gave only a few copper coins in the Temple offering, but gave everything she had, and wealthy who put in large amounts of money but insignificant amounts as a proportion of their resources. Paul and Jesus call for generous free giving.

This giving is truly a gift, not dues or taxes. Dues are set amounts we must pay in order to maintain membership in a club or organization. Taxes are set amounts we must pay the government as citizens in order to enjoy the benefits of national security, good roads, retirement and other services which the government deems necessary and appropriate to provide. Generous giving is not required giving. It is free giving. There is not one amount that fits all. There is not even one amount all at a particular level of income are required to provide. Giving is more personal and more satisfying than that. It is not my role as a preacher to tell you what to give. It is my role to remind you who you are. You are a recipient of God’s Generosity. You are called to live and give generously – freely, voluntarily and cheerfully. “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”^{iv}

III

Third a radically generous giver will BLESS AND BE BLESSED. He or she will put out lots of seed. Paul illustrates his point with reference to a farmer who spreads only a little seed across the field and a farmer who spreads an abundant amount of seed across the field. “The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”^v Where little goes out, little is produced and little comes back in. Where great amounts of seeds are sown, great proportional amounts of money given to causes we feel led by God to support, great results return.

Great blessings come. To the degree you send out blessings you will receive back blessings.

In the ministry of South Highland, we are most effective where we are most impassioned. Ministries that have captured our imaginations like Sunday Club, the Child Development Center, the Adult Daycare, missions to Africa and India, the Presbytery's Living River Camp on the Cahaba, have garnered strong support and made significant impact on lives of the givers and receivers alike. Ministries that we have treated as some sort of duties or obligations where we really did not believe much in the validity of the cause have been stillborn and come to nothing.

The principle of bountiful sowing of seeds, of generous giving of gifts has produced amazing results. Paul puts a powerful spiritual spin on our giving in asserting that God will send us blessings in return. This does not mean we will receive material return on our giving, although sometimes we will. But it does mean we will always be blessed as we give.

IV

Fourth a radically generous giver will experience DEEP SPIRITUAL GROWTH. Paul, in fact, links this giving of money with receiving God's spiritual blessings. The image is much like that of the Sea of Galilee and the sense of flowing movement that is life-giving. "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God."^{vi}

Our giving accomplishes practical ministry. But then it circles right around to our confession of the gospel of Christ itself. We evidence an authentic confession of our faith not only by how sincerely or how often we recite a creed or confession of faith, be it the Apostles or the Nicene Creeds, or the Scots or the Westminster Confessions, significant as those holy summaries we use in worship are, but actually by our generous giving. Through our giving we make confession of our faith and at the same time make possible the works of love God calls us to. A brief prayer over the offering puts it all to well. "No matter what we say or do, this is what we think of you!" The fact that Paul ends this instruction on giving in a doxological outburst "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift" reflects just how high, holy and central giving is to our worship and spiritual growth, akin to God's total self-giving to us..

I am amazed at the difference the Good News of God through Jesus Christ has made upon this world, and this community, and upon your life and mine. I am grateful for the privilege of sharing the blessings God has sent my way and being a blessing to others. May God bless the gifts we give and use us to show forth his healing mercy to the ends of the earth.

“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory. Alleluia. Amen.”

ⁱ John Buchanan, in a sermon preached at The National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., November 8., 2009.

ⁱⁱ 2 Cor. 9:3

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Cor. 9:5

^{iv} 2 Cor. 9:7.

^v 2 Cor. 9:6

^{vi} 2 Cor. 9:10-12