

The Joy of Generosity

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[0 : 00] Glad that you have joined us this evening. Thanking God that they fixed the air conditioning. I know you are as well if you were here last week.

It's a different environment this week. But glad to be here. Glad to be looking at the text that we're going to be looking at tonight. It's the last passage in our study of Ephesians.

We've been doing this for several months. And we've come to the end. And I don't know about you, but I always get kind of sad when we get to the end of a book. I always wish that we could keep going because there's been so much here.

Essentially, this letter is a thank you letter. Paul is writing a thank you letter. I don't know the last time that you wrote a thank you letter. But Paul is writing a thank you letter to a church that he hasn't seen for ten years who has supported him again and again and again.

And they've just sent a financial contribution. And so there's all kinds of rich themes in this thank you letter. He talks a lot about joy. The joyful life. He talks a lot about gratitude.

[1 : 05] Talks a lot about contentment. Talks about what it means to know and to be in Christ. And yet, not surprisingly, as we come to the end of this letter, because it's a thank you letter in response to financial contribution, he gets to the theme of generosity.

And Advent's been around for, I guess, oh, about eight or nine years. And we haven't really talked about this topic much, which is surprising because it's a core aspect of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, is to understand and practice generosity.

Generosity. So that's what we're going to look at tonight. Paul's final parting words to the Philippians, where he talks about generosity, and he tells us three things about it. He says, first of all, that it flows from contentment.

In other words, the more content we are, the more generous we're able to be. So we'll look at that. It flows from contentment. Second, it helps us grow.

It's actually necessary for spiritual growth. And then third and finally, that generosity glorifies God. So let's pray to God now to help us in our study of his word.

[2 : 13] Lord, we ask you, as we know that you're here, as we were just reminded as we read the gospel, that you're the God who is with us. That you're not a silent partner. But rather, you're the God who speaks.

And our place is to, first and foremost, listen. Some of us are here, and we know you and know your son, Jesus. Some of us are here wondering what this is all about and trying to figure out what we believe.

Lord, we ask that you, being the only one who knows our hearts fully, you're the only one who can speak to us and tell us exactly what we need to hear. And so we pray that you would do that for each of us, including me, Lord.

We pray that you would do this by the power of your spirit. In the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

So, Philippians chapter 4, beginning in verse 10, we'll go through the end of the book, verse 23.

But if you look at verses 10 through 13, if I could kind of summarize what's going on here. Paul is as politely as he can.

[3 : 16] And, you know, Paul's not the most tactful individual. But as politely as he can, Paul is essentially saying here, thanks, sort of. And I'll explain what I mean.

He's in Rome. He's on house arrest. Resources are running very low. He's not heard from anyone in a long time. And, you know, some people say when Paul was imprisoned here that he was, you know, shackled naked to the floor and birds were pecking out his eyes and all these hearts.

It wasn't that bad, but it was bad. It meant that he needed outside support to live. And he's running low. And finally, Epaphroditus shows up with a financial contribution.

They've taken up a collection. They've passed the hat, so to speak, in Philippi. And they've sent Epaphroditus with the money. And Paul says, on the one hand, he says, I rejoiced greatly. When I saw Epaphroditus and I saw the money that you sent, it filled me with joy. And then, on the other hand, he says, and he's trying to be careful.

[4 : 19] He says, you know, as much as I appreciate the money, I didn't actually need it. I would have been okay. So you've got to ask, why such an odd response?

It doesn't sound like the kind of thank you letters we might write. And the reason for the oddity is this, is that at his core, Paul is a pastor. And Paul sees this generosity kind of growing up in the Philippian church like a little flower bud.

And like any good pastor, when he sees something happening like that, his first instinct is to want to cultivate it and protect it and nourish it and encourage it to grow.

And so he takes this opportunity to do just that by teaching them for just a few verses about contentment. Because, and this is really the first point, contentment, as we said a moment ago, is the kind of root bed of generosity.

So he says, I want to encourage the growth of this generosity in you. And so you need to understand where this comes from. It actually is rooted in contentment. So let me tell you about contentment.

[5 : 24] The more content we are, the more generous we will be with our money and our time and our energy, etc. And Paul actually makes a powerful claim here.

He says, I've learned the secret of contentment. Which sounds like the beginning of every self-help book and seminar out there. You know, here's the secret for four easy payments.

And so Paul is making this kind of bold claim. And so the question is, can he back it up? If you look at most religions, and I know a lot of you kind of think a lot about this.

And you're familiar with lots of different religions. And some of you have studied philosophy. And if you kind of survey different religions and philosophies and thinkers out there. Most of them agree that contentment is among our, should be among our highest aims.

And actually most agree, more or less, on the way to contentment. So most kind of say, here's how to get to contentment in the same way.

[6 : 26] The Stoic philosophers, like Epictetus, say, and this is to quote him, wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants. All right, it's not how much you have, it's how little you want.

That's true wealth. That sounds intuitively true. Buddhism, the third noble truth says the way to overcome suffering, a word that can loosely be translated kind of pervasive discontentment, is to extinguish our desires.

So the same kind of idea, right? Limit your desires. Emmanuel Kant says this, we're not rich by what we possess, but by what we can do without. Again, same thing.

John Stuart Mill, I've learned to seek my happiness by limiting my desires, rather than in attempting to satisfy them. So you see, they're all kind of saying the same thing.

You know, contentment comes when we simplify, when we limit our desires, or altogether extinguish them, when we reduce that which we demand to live the good life.

[7 : 35] When we, you know, and it's funny, I think about just not too long ago in my life, when I was younger, I used to idealize the simple life. And I actually had a lot of pride in the fact that I just owned some books, and a desk, and a mattress, and some clothes.

And that was just about it. And I used to take a lot of pride in that. And I sort of idealized, you know, I would think, wow, you know, so many people around the world have so much less than we do, and they're so much better off.

And I would imagine, you know, how great, you know, there's kind of a blessing in being poor. And how amazing would it be if you could just reduce all of your possessions to what would fit in a backpack?

And how amazing would that be? And then I kind of began to realize that, you know, that doesn't really reflect wisdom so much as it reflects privilege.

You know, it's a privilege of the wealthy to idealize poverty. And what it reflected is really a person who had no idea of the reality of poverty.

[8 : 38] But these are the kinds of ideas that we can cultivate when we idealize the contented life. And most people assume that Christianity says the same thing.

Well, the problem is your desires. You need to desire less. Your problem is that you desire too much. And I'm just here to tell you that's completely wrong. That's not at all what Christianity says. In fact, it's the opposite of what Christianity says. Christianity says this. Our problem is not that we want too much. It's that we want too little. It's that we settle. The opening salvo in C.S. Lewis' *The Weight of Glory*.

If you've not read this sermon, just prioritize it this summer. And I know I kind of have put a limit on how many times I reference it, so I apologize for bringing it up again. But the opening words are worth the price of the book.

And so I'm just going to read a little snippet of the opening. He says this. He says, And then listen to what he says.

[9 : 59] Just listen to this. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.

We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea.

And then this next sentence floored me when I first read it. We are far too easily pleased. Mmm. Those sentences. Every now and then in your life, you come across a sentence that just changes you.

And for me, it was that. That was like an arrow into my heart. We're far too easily pleased. I felt like somebody had been reading my mail. So the secret of contentment is this.

Here's the secret. You want to know the secret? You sitting down? It's impossible in this life. That's not going to sell books. I'm sorry.

[11 : 10] It's impossible in this life. For one simple, glorious, awful reason. That we were made with desires that are simply too strong for this world.

We want more than we can ever find here. It sounds like a curse. It feels like a curse. But one day it's going to give way to unimaginable blessing.

You know, I was not too, just a few days ago with my family, and we're sitting and we're watching the sunset, and the boys are running around, wife's next to me, drinking in Old Fashioned.

I make amazing Old Fashions, and I have one. And, just kidding. Not really. And it's this seemingly perfect moment, and I'm looking out, and I'm looking at the sunset, and the family, and everything is just right.

And I was just thinking, this is it. This is everything. This is contentment. And then even as I thought that, there was a little voice in the back of that voice that was saying, really, is this it?

[12 : 11] This is it? I mean, this is great. Don't get me wrong. But this is it. And there was an urge, a longing, a kind of thing in me that just wanted to kind of pierce through the sunset.

As beautiful as this is, there's got to be more. There's got to be something behind it. I want that. What is that? Lewis would say that's God. Right?

And it's taken Paul many, many, many years, a lot of suffering, a lot of heartbreak, to realize this truth. If anybody who's 20 tells you they've discovered the secret to contentment, don't trust them. Okay? No offense. But Paul is an old man. It's taken him many years, a lot of heartache, to get to the place where he can finally say, I've learned, not in a book, through blood and sweat and tears. I've learned the secret of contentment. I know how to be brought low. I know how to abound. He's realized this, that across the whole spectrum, the low times and the times of abundance, there is always discontentment.

[13 : 16] The low times, you know. You know those times. Some of you are in them right now. Hopeless. Struggling. You know, Laura and I know firsthand what it's like to get the email or the phone call that you do not want.

And to have that feeling of you would do anything to change it. And it's so easy to think that if you can just change this one thing, nothing else will matter and everything will be okay and you'll be content.

And we can live off that fantasy for lifetimes. But I wonder if it's even worse to be one of the few people who actually achieves it all. I think it's worse.

At least in the low times, you can imagine that times will get better. But what about in your best times? And you think this is it. Assuming you know who Judd Apatow is, kind of a genre-defining

director, producer, bridesmaids, This is 30, Knocked Up, I don't know, all those, that whole genre of movies.

And anyway, I mean, you know, if anybody's a picture of success these days in the film world, it's Judd Apatow. And he says this. There was a great interview in Rolling Stone last year.

[14:32] And listen to what he says. He says, All the success in the world won't heal you. It doesn't do anything. There's great distraction in thinking that when I get to the top of that hill, it's all going to be awesome.

And then when you get to the top of the hill, you're like, Oh, I guess now I really have to deal with my problems because that didn't work at all. There's great distraction in thinking when I finally get that job, when I finally get that degree, that credential, when I finally get that spouse, when I finally get pregnant, when I finally am able to arrive, then I'll be content.

And then you get there. No. Paul knows that true contentment is not found in circumstances, but the God behind the circumstances. He knows that true contentment is not found in things, but in the God who made all things.

And he knows that it's not even found in human relationships. It's found in the God who became a human in order to have a relationship with us. He knows that because he has Christ, one day, not today, but one day, he will experience full contentment because he'll be in the arms of his Savior. Not today. See, a lot of people say, except Christ, you know, no Jesus, no peace, no Jesus, no peace, the bumper sticker. It's a lie. It's not true. The Bible doesn't say you're going to have total contentment and peace now.

[16:10] No, it promises that one day you will. But not now. Read Philipians. It's full of longing. Paul says, I, I, he says, I don't know, I'm facing imminent death.

And I don't know, and he's being serious, no bravado here, I don't know if I, if I would prefer to die so that the longing will be over and finally I will see Jesus face to face or if I, or if I should continue here to see you grow in your faith.

And he really can't decide. Right? This is Paul's longing for contentment, longing to be with his Savior. He talks about finishing the race, forgetting what lies behind, and fixing his eyes on Christ. And because he trusts God's promise to get him there one day, he's able to achieve a relative contentment today. So, what does this have to do with generosity?

Long first point, admittedly, but very foundational. Yeah, yeah. What does this have to do with contentment? I'll tell you. The reason we're not more generous is because we look at our time and look at our stuff and look at our money and look at our energy and somehow we imbue it with significance and importance that it was never meant to have.

[17:30] This is going to make me happy. This is going to make me content. This is going to make life worth living. Not true. It's a lie. But the more we believe that, the less generous we're going to be because we're going to clutch it and we're going to protect it and we're going to make sure that you can't have any.

So, generosity flows from contentment. Second two points flow out of this point and they're shorter. Second point is this. Generosity not only flows from contentment.

You go on and you see that Paul wants to make it clear that generosity helps us grow. It's a part of growth. It's actually necessary. So, as much as their generosity may help Paul, Paul actually makes it clear that it has an even greater impact on the Philipians themselves.

And he begins to recount all their generosity, right? These are not kind of like one-off givers, right? He says, when nobody else believed in me, nobody else was supporting me, you were supporting me.

When I got kicked out and I had to go down to Thessalonica, you supported me. When there was need in Jerusalem, you gave me money to bring to Jerusalem, right? And now you've sent me money again. Nobody else is supporting me.

[18:37] So, he recounts all of this and then he says in verse 17, bear in mind again, this is a thank you letter, not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.

In other words, thanks for the money, it's not really about the money. That's not actually the main thing. The main thing is, in the act of giving, the fruit in your life has increased.

So back in chapter 1, you may remember, Paul says that his prayer for them is that God would bring to completion the good work began in them so that they would be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.

So in other words, he's saying this, generosity is necessary for spiritual growth. There's a lot, you guys work in the non-profit world, you know a lot better than I do about this stuff, but there are a lot of groups now that are kind of big on outcome studies.

Right? So like GiveWell and AidGrade, do you know these groups? And maybe, I don't know, some of you work for them, but anyway, their whole reason for existing is to evaluate outcomes and to make sure that every dollar we give has maximum impact.

[19 : 50] Because you don't want your charitable contributions to get absorbed into the bureaucracy. You want it to go to where it matters, or at least we want to feel like we're really making a difference. And so, and this is good.

I'm not knocking this. This is actually really necessary. We want our charities to be effective. We want to trim the fat. All that stuff is great. But in all the emphasis on outcome, I think we can forget the impact of generosity on us.

And I'm not talking about feeling good about ourselves. That can actually be its own idol. I'm talking about the impact that it has on our spiritual growth. Our hearts.

Paul's saying he wants the Philippians to give, not primarily because he needs their money, he's actually survived for years without it, but because they need to give in order to grow. Habitual generosity is a major part of how we grow.

And there's really two reasons that we see why that enables us to grow. Verse 14, you see the first reason. Habitual generosity is actually a mark of true community.

[20 : 57] That's what true community looks like. Right? So Paul uses an amazing word in verse 14. He says, yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. Right? Kind is like beautiful.

What you did was a beautiful thing. Why was it beautiful? Not the money, the fact that you were willing to share my trouble. And the share there comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, which is the word we use for Christian fellowship.

To share in that way is profoundly intimate. It means we are so connected and I so love you and you so love me that when you struggle, I feel the pain. When I struggle, you feel the pain. We share in it.

And he says, it's beautiful when I see the fact that you're miles away and it's been 10 years since I've seen you and you could be doing all kinds of other things and yet I'm here in prison and you're sharing this.

You're experiencing it. So he's saying, your motive is actually motivated primarily by empathy. And that's a beautiful thing. Spiritual growth means learning what it means to be so much a part of a community.

[22 : 02] So much a part of a fellowship, a *koinonia*, that you feel the struggle, that you feel the pain. This isn't just a couple getting divorced and oh well, sorry it didn't work out.

This isn't just somebody who needs help moving and hope they find some help. You know, this isn't somebody who just seems really depressed and withdrawn and wow, they haven't been to church in a while and too bad.

That when people are struggling, we feel it. We share it. It keeps us up at night. And we feel a certain amount of responsibility to make sure that that need gets met. Paul says, that's a beautiful thing.

So that's a part of how generosity provokes our growth is that it requires, it necessitates the growth of empathy in our hearts.

By the way, this is one of the reasons that we all give regularly and sacrificially to the church. It's just one way that we embody that sense of seeking the well-being of the whole.

[23 : 07] And then the second reason is this, habitual generosity actually requires habitual trust. You can't give sacrificially, you can't give meaningfully unless at some point you have to address the issue of what are you going to do now that you don't have the stuff that you gave away.

Right? To put yourself in a position of need and vulnerability. And that's why Paul reassures them in verse 19, and my God will supply every need of yours. According to his riches and glory in Christ Jesus.

Now, this verse has been twisted and perverted by the kind of prosperity gospel movement, which is essentially a kind of get-rich-quick scheme with a kind of veneer of spirituality over it.

I mean, so verses like this get co-opted and taught in this way. Well, you have this little bit of money and you sow that as a seed. You know, you send it to me and then God in response is going to give

you three times more.

And it says so right here in the Bible. You know, or if you do it in the next ten minutes, it's ten times more. And you get a prayer cloth. And it's that kind of thing. And that's not what Paul's saying here. Paul's saying, I know that you've given to the point, like, you sending this money, this wasn't extra income, this wasn't a surplus of cash.

[24 : 26] You sending this means you may not eat. And I know that, and I just want to assure you, God will provide. God will provide. You can trust God. Generosity like this requires trust.

And it's interesting, you know, Paul's saying, well, you know, I just think about people in my life. You know, I think about, I think about my parents. I think about our bishop, Steve. You know, these are people a generation or two past or before me, older than I am, where I get to see them at kind of the other end of life and what it's like to talk to somebody who's prioritized giving over the course of a lifetime.

And, you know, my parents have done that amazingly over the years. And somehow, they didn't agree on much, but that was one thing they always agreed on. And I see it in our bishop.

You know, he was talking about it the other day, and I think back to the seminary, the same seminary that taught me that Mark comes first. And, but I, it was written first.

[25 : 29] It was written first. But, I think about these, these two professors, Bill and Ida Spencer. They were like a dream team married couple. They were both teachers, both professors, brilliant.

I learned a lot of good theology and stuff from them. But I remember the biggest impression they left on me is when I went over to their house, and this is in Massachusetts, mind you. And I went over to their house, and in Massachusetts, they heated their house with a wood stove.

And I said, why do you guys do that? Can't you get Central Air, HVAC? And they said, well, you really want to know? And I said, yeah. And they said, well, we don't tell many people this, but when we got married when we were really young, we wanted to make it a priority that every year we would give a little more away.

And so, they had built up to this point when I talked to them where they were giving away 50% of their income. 50% of everything that they made, they gave away. They gave to the church, primarily their church, and then they gave to a number of other things.

50%. Wood stove. It necessitated a wood stove. Their goal was to get their cost of living down so they could give away more. And I remember thinking of all the books I've read and all the talks I've heard and the sermons I've sat under, I remember seeing that and that made more of an impression on me.

[26 : 45] And it has continued to challenge me and convict me. So if you live like that, you have to trust God. Right? So people say, people like me say, I want to trust God more.

We get down on our knees at night and we say, God, please help me trust you more. And then we start working on the insulation. Right? And we insulate our whole life. You know? It's like we're living in a bunker.

And we build the walls and we, you know, make sure that they're, you know, 10 feet thick and then we're like, God, please help me to trust you more. And then we kind of go back to work, you know? And we just want to make sure that although I trust God ideally, theoretically, theologically, I don't ever want to actually have to put that to the test.

That's not trust, it's talk. If you want to grow in your trust of God, you have to put yourself in a position where God has to come through. Where if he doesn't come through, you're through. So this is why generosity helps us grow because quite frankly, sacrificial giving, that's what it means to respond when you share in the needs and the struggles of a community and sacrificial giving requires that we trust God.

So that's the second thing we see here about generosity and the third thing, the third thing is really a great way to wrap up the book and that's this, that generosity not only flows from contentment and not only helps us grow, but it actually glorifies God.

[28 : 11] You know, generosity, when we give of our time and energy and money, when we give those things freely and joyfully, we're actually glorifying God. Paul calls their gift, listen to this language, this is money, and he calls it a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

And then he says of all of this in verse 20, to our God and Father be glory forever and ever, amen. He's saying all this is actually about the glory of God. Generosity itself is about the glory of God.

Why? Because our generosity reflects God's generosity. Because the gospel, which is at the heart of our faith, is actually the truth of God's ultimate generosity.

It's this great story of people who hate and spit in the face of the God who made them, say, we want to go it alone, never want to see you again. And God, in response, says, okay, I'm going to give you everything I have.

I'm going to give it all to you. Everything that is most precious to me. Because I love you. And when that kind of generosity pierces the world, it changes it.

[29 : 24] It alters it. Because of this offer of Jesus on the cross, we see that God's answer to all of the pain and suffering of the world is an act of ultimate generosity.

generosity. So, Paul says, our generosity is like a fragrant offering to God. Why? Because it reflects God's offering.

It reflects Jesus' offering of himself for us. So that's why every week, before we come to this table, every week just before that, we give an offering.

And that's not just kind of like, well, we had to fit it in somewhere. It's because before we can really come and receive what God has done for us in this meal, and this meal represents the sacrificial death of Jesus on our behalf, before we can really receive that, we have to reflect on the impact that it has in our own life.

And so as an act of worship, we give in a way that reflects the generosity of Christ on our behalf. So that's why we do it when we do it.

[30 : 35] And this is, by the way, why we say that if you're a Christian, don't do this because the church needs the money. God's going to provide for the church. Do this as an act of worship. We say that every week.

And this is why we say if you're not a Christian, if you're one of the people who's a part of our church, praise God. We love that you're here. If you're one of the people who's not sure what you believe about Jesus, then we don't want you to give an offering.

We don't need your money. We don't want your money because it's not about the money. It's about a heart that knows and understands the generosity of God so much that generosity is its response. Right? So that's how we encourage people to give as a response to God's generosity, an overflow of gratitude. So just a few implications to pull all this together before we move on in the service.

A few things we can glean from this as we think about our own lives. First thing is this, if generosity really is rooted in contentment, if it flows from contentment, then if ever, like me, you struggle to be generous, and I do, if ever you struggle to be generous, that should be like a canary in a coal mine where you say, okay, this is telling me that I'm beginning to clutch something in my life.

[31 : 55] I'm beginning to imbue it with promise and hope that it doesn't deserve, that it can't bear up under the weight of. I need, and it's a warning that we're clutching rather than holding freely and lightly that which we've been given.

The second thing is this, if generosity really does help us grow, then I would encourage you to be as intentional about your giving as you are about your diet or your grooming or your job, your education, right?

Some of you, like at age three, had your plan through age 50. You know, it was all mapped out of where you were going to go in the degrees, and that's amazing. I'm not like that. I admire that. Can we at least be half as intentional about our generosity?

You know, when you're laying out your house, are you laying it out in a way where you can fit a bunch of people in it? You know, when you're buying a table, you're buying the kind of table that you can get a bunch of people around, right? When you're planning your weekend or planning your kind of time off, are you planning ways that you might make yourself more available to people?

Are we thinking about that? When we do our budgets, I just keep coming back to the Spencers. You know, what's the priority in budgeting? What are our kind of budget goals down the road?

[33 : 13] I rarely meet people who say, well, my number one financial goal is to be able to give more away. It's staggering to me. And then the third thing is this, or the last thing is this, if you're someone like me who struggles to be generous, the answer is not to try harder.

The answer is not to leave here saying, well, I just need to buckle down. You know, the answer is right here in front of us.

The answer is to look at the cross. You want to become more generous? The only way to become more generous is to fix your eyes on the cross, to allow the truth of God's ultimate generosity to sink

into your heart so that it melts your heart.

And it's out of that place of gratitude and amazement and awe that true generosity springs. The more that sinks into our hearts, the more generous we become. Let's pray.

Lord, we recognize that all of this, this entire gathering is a response to your generosity. We thank you for that. It staggers the mind.

[34 : 29] It breaks our hearts. Lord, as we continue on, we pray that this truth would sink deep into our hearts. We pray that we would be known as a generous community.

We pray, we thank you and praise you for all of the ways your generosity is reflected in this community and we pray for more of it. We pray for more of it.

We ask this in your Son's holy name. Amen.