

Generosity

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[0 : 00] Well, again, I say welcome to you. We are in a series right now. We are looking at the book of 2 Corinthians, which is fantastic.

The title of the series is called Power Through Weakness, and so we've been looking at how the gospel transforms power, how the gospel turns power upside down.

And what that means is that there are a lot of things that look like weakness, that look like foolishness in the eyes of the world that are, in fact, sources of tremendous spiritual power.

So we've been looking at some examples of that over the weeks. We looked at examples like humility or suffering and how we respond to suffering or forgiveness, reconciliation.

These are things that in the eyes of many in the world look like foolishness. They look weak, and yet they have tremendous spiritual power. They have the power not only to transform individuals but also entire societies.

[1 : 02] So in our series this week, we come to chapters 8 and 9. We're going to look at them as one big chunk because they all hold together around this same theme, yet another example of something that looks like weakness or foolishness and yet contains tremendous power, the example of generosity.

Generosity. Christian generosity is uniquely powerful. Right? There's a lot of generosity in the world, a lot of reasons that people want to be generous, but Christian generosity is unique, and it's uniquely powerful as a result in at least three ways, because of its motivation, because of its posture, and because of its purpose, its ultimate purpose.

So let's pray, and then we're going to look at Paul's letter, 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for being the kind of God who doesn't just leave us to figure it out, but You're the kind of God who's a living God, and You're here, and You're active, and Your Holy Spirit is with us and in us.

So we pray now, just as we sang a moment ago, that You would open our eyes and open our ears and open our hearts, that Your Word would come alive and that we would come face to face with the living Word, Jesus Christ.

That's why we're here, and it's in His name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, let's look at the motivation for Christian generosity. Just to give you a little context, Paul is raising money to send aid to the church in Jerusalem.

[2 : 34] The people are very poor there. The Christians are very poor there. There's a lot of reasons for that. People would come there on pilgrimage and wouldn't have a job or a place to live, and they would convert to Christianity.

They would end up staying. There were people who wanted to work or do a trade, but they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods that they needed to worship in order to be part of the guild, and so their business suffered.

There are lots of reasons why the Jerusalem Christians were poor. So Paul's trying to send aid, and Paul had reached out to the Corinthians to help be a part of this relief effort.

And a year earlier, the Corinthians had started a giving plan, setting money aside every week during worship so that when Paul came back, he could take it all to Jerusalem.

We read about that in 1 Corinthians 16. So they had started out giving, and they had started out doing it with a lot of enthusiasm. But in verse 10, we learned that the giving had sort of petered out.

[3 : 31] It had stopped. And Paul's very concerned about that. And so he's writing in this section to try to encourage them to make good on their commitment. He says, you made a pledge. Now please fulfill that pledge.

And what I want you to notice is his concern is not primarily the money itself. His concern is really the hearts of the Corinthians. His concern is their spiritual health.

And so he's trying to motivate them to continue giving. Now notice what he does not say here. He does not say, now's a great time to give because of the tax benefits. He does not say, you should give because it's going to build your character.

It's going to be good for you. He doesn't say, you should give because it's going to make you feel good. He doesn't say, you should give because if you don't give, these people have no hope. He doesn't say any of those things that we very often hear during charitable giving campaigns.

Look at what he says. He says in chapter 8, verse 8, I say this, complete your gift, not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love is also genuine.

[4 : 37] He connects their giving to their love. Spiritually mature Christians are motivated to give not because anyone convinces them to give.

The reasons that I suggested earlier, they're decent reasons, they're valid reasons, but that's not the motivation behind Christian giving. Spiritually mature Christians give because they're filled with love.

Because that's what love naturally does. It just gives. And so they can't help it. And it sounds as though the Corinthians used to be that way and something has changed.

Paul is worried that they are in fact becoming more and more and more like the culture around them. Spiritually mature Christians tend to be more promiscuous with their money and stingy with their bodies.

The Corinthian culture was the opposite. They were very promiscuous with their bodies and very stingy with their money. And Paul says you're becoming more and more like the culture around you.

[5 : 40] But Christian generosity is motivated by an overflow of love and joy. So he's saying where is that love that I knew? Where is that joy that I saw in you? And this is why he points them to the example of the Macedonians in verses 1 through 5 of chapter 8.

Let me just read this. He says, We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia. For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed.

That's a play on words. Just listen to that. Their abundance of joy and extreme poverty have overflowed. They're overflowing out of extreme poverty in a wealth of generosity on their part.

The most amazing thing about the Macedonians and their generosity is not that they were willing to give money in the midst of their own crisis, which they were. Nor is it the fact that they gave far beyond what they could afford to give, which they did.

The most amazing thing about the Macedonians is what Paul says in verse 4. Paul didn't even have to ask them to give. They came to Paul and it says they begged Paul for the favor of being able to take part in the relief of the saints.

[6 : 56] They asked Paul if they could give. It may very well have been that Paul thought, you know, the Macedonians, they're facing their own turmoil and upheaval. They don't have any money to give. I'm not even going to bother asking them.

They'd probably be offended if I asked them. But then they came to him and said, we would love to be a part of this. Please, can we help? Here you go. Here's everything we have. And Paul saw this for what it was.

He didn't see this and say, wow, those Macedonians, they're great people. He said, this is clearly the grace of God being poured into their lives. So true generosity is motivated by love overflowing out of our lives into the lives of others.

That's the motivation. And that has implications for us. When it comes to generosity, motivation matters. The reasons we give, the reason behind our generosity is extremely important.

I'll give you a couple of examples of why. When it comes to generosity, when it comes to care for the poor, I think some of us in Christian circles are tempted to emphasize the importance of the giving, the importance of the social activism, the importance of the relief effort, regardless of the motivation.

[8 : 15] It's sort of an approach that says the ends matter. The means don't really matter nearly as much. As Alistair Roberts writes, for some, the Christian message that summons people to the works of mercy can be reduced to a vanishing mediator for a generic message of social justice and welfare.

In other words, for some in the church, the focus is really on the social justice and welfare. The theology is very secondary. The motivation is very secondary. What we need is social reform. The theology, believe what you want. It's the end that really matters. This is the thinking behind the social gospel movement. But Paul would actually say the opposite. He would say the most important thing actually is your relationship with God.

Generosity is merely an overflow of the life of God in us. Generosity is a symptom. And if you over-focus on the generosity, over and above the relationship with God from which it flows, you do so at your own peril.

A friend of mine, Peter Greer, is the president and CEO of Hope International. You're probably familiar with their work. They do amazing work combating extreme poverty through microenterprise development.

[9 : 32] But all that good work nearly destroyed him and nearly destroyed his family. He wrote a book about it a few years back called *The Spiritual Danger of Doing Good*. That's one of those books that I read it and I just think, you know, I think everybody I know in D.C. probably should read this book.

The Spiritual Danger, because we have a lot of very good people. Very good people in this room. And what he says, he essentially, this book says, he talks about seeing numerous friends and mentors who are doing all kinds of good in the world, but ultimately he says one after another he sees these people in his life being overtaken by self-righteousness, by burnout, by infidelity, losing their faith, financial misconduct, personal meltdowns.

And the same thing almost happened to him. And the whole point of the book is this. Doing good works apart from Christ, doing good while allowing ourselves to become disconnected from Christ, where our focus is on the good but not on the source of the good, that is spiritually dangerous.

It's either going to lead us one of two directions. We're either going to be led down a road of pride and self-righteousness, a kind of smug sense of superiority over other people who don't do as much good, or it's going to lead us down the road of exhaustion, cynicism, burnout, or worse.

And many of us work in fields where we are doing a lot of good, and you probably know exactly what I'm talking about. We're not meant to be sources of generosity. We're meant to be conduits of grace.

[11 : 08] It has to come from somewhere else. God pours his life into us, and we overflow into the lives of others. So, that's the first reason why motivation really matters. I'm glad you're doing good, but why?

What's the impact of that good on you and on your soul? And then other people tend to go in the opposite direction, right? Other people tend to react against the social gospel movement, and they see any emphasis on social action in the church as evidence of theological decline.

You're on a slippery slope when you begin to talk about justice. And this passage would challenge us as well. I mean, Paul says in verse 7, as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, in our love for you, see that you excel in this act of grace also.

The Corinthians prided themselves on being filled with the Holy Spirit and having all manner of spiritual gifts. They thought of themselves as very spiritually mature, impressive people.

And so, Paul's point is, he's basically saying, if you're truly filled with the Holy Spirit, you should overflow not only with gifts like faith or speech or knowledge, but also in care for the poor.

[12 : 27] Also in tremendous love-generated generosity for people who lack. And so, the point is pretty clear. For those of us who think of ourselves as spiritually mature Christians, Holy Spirit-filled Christians, it is all well and good for us to be theologically sound.

That's incredibly important, and if you know me, you know that matters a great deal to me. But the question we also need to ask is, am I generous? Am I generous?

Am I generous to those in need? Do I care about the poor? Do I care about justice? So, motivation matters a great deal. And so, this is the countercultural motivation for Christian generosity.

It's one of the things that sets it apart from other forms of generosity we see in the world, God's overflowing love and joy in our lives. The next thing we see about Christian generosity is it has a very distinct posture that also matters a great deal.

The posture of Christian generosity. If you've ever read the book, *When Helping Hurts*, by Steve Corbett and Brian Fickert, they make a very crucial observation. I remember reading this book for the first time, and this really, this part really struck home with me.

[13 : 42] They say, They say, For those of us who want to love and serve the economically poor, we can have the best intentions, but the way that we act can often communicate, albeit unintentionally, that we are superior and they are inferior.

Right? Even with the best intentions. That can be the message that comes across, and that's why Paul's words in verses 13 to 15 are so important. In chapter 8, he says this, As a matter of fairness, your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, and there may be fairness.

Now, we read that, and if you know the context, you think, what abundance? What does he mean by their abundance? Aren't the Jerusalem Christians dirt poor? Isn't there a crisis? They don't have any abundance.

Paul actually says more about this situation in Romans 15 verse 27. What we learn is that the Corinthian Christians were economically rich, but they were spiritually poor. They're economically rich, but they're spiritually poor.

The Jerusalem Christians are economically poor, but they are spiritually wealthy. They're spiritually rich. And so, Paul's point there is, listen, as Gentile Christians, you owe your entire faith, your entire spirituality, to the Jewish tradition, to the Jewish faith, that ultimately produced the Messiah.

[15 : 28] Right? The least you can do is give out of your material abundance to help these believers who are so spiritually wealthy, and yet materially lacking.

And what we learn is, there are different kinds of poverty, and different kinds of abundance. And so, what Paul is doing is giving them a principle to guide their generosity.

It's a principle that we might call the principle of reciprocity. That's really what Paul means by fairness. Reciprocity, as we're using it here, means essentially this.

We are all equal before the Lord. We are all equal. And we all need each other. And we all have certain ways in which we're impoverished, and we all have certain ways in which we enjoy abundance.

And God's desire for us is reciprocity. That out of my abundance, I would supply your need, and out of your abundance, you would supply my need. We need each other.

[16 : 29] And then Paul takes this even further. He says in verse 15, he quotes from the book of Exodus, from chapter 16, he says, As it is written, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.

Now, he's referencing a very specific time in Israel's history when they had been set free from slavery in Egypt. They were wandering in the wilderness, and God was leading them and providing for them in the form of manna, bread from heaven.

And so, what Paul is saying to the Corinthians is pretty amazing. He's saying, listen, you need to stop seeing yourselves in terms of Gentile and Jew. You need to stop seeing yourselves in terms of rich and poor.

You are one people. You are one people. God has made us into one people. And don't think the Exodus is just some story from back in the day that applied to some other people, but not you. He's saying, Just as God once led His people, Israel, out of slavery in Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness in the form of manna, so God is now leading all of us, His church, out of slavery to sin and death.

[17 : 43] We are in the midst of our own Exodus, and this Exodus is going to last until the new creation, and God is providing for us in the form of His Son, the true bread from heaven, the true manna.

And so, what He's saying is we are all one people. We are all in this Exodus together, and all that we have, your gifts and your privileges and your connections and your networks and your wealth and your talents and all of those things, this is all manna.

It all came from God. It didn't come from you. It's all God's provision for everyone in the community. And so, what this does is it creates a profound unity and solidarity.

Don't think of those Jewish Christians as people over there different from you. They're part of your group. You're in the same people group. And so, this is the way the gospel transforms the posture of Christian generosity.

It infuses the relationship between rich and poor with equality and solidarity and reciprocity. So, instead of exacerbating the God complexes of the rich, lest we think of ourselves as saviors, the gospel says, listen, you are just as broken, you are just as spiritually needy as anyone else, and

don't let your bank account lead you to think otherwise.

[19 : 10] Instead of exacerbating the feelings of shame or inferiority felt by the economically poor, it restores dignity and it restores self-worth.

It affirms that money is not the measure of a man. It affirms that every single one of God's people has gifts and abilities that are unique and necessary for the welfare of the whole community.

That everyone has something to offer that others in the community need. Everyone has abundance, and God can use that abundance to meet needs in others' lives.

So, the posture of Christian generosity is not, good news, I'm here to meet your needs. The posture of Christian generosity says, I'm broken.

You're broken. But the good news is that God has sent the true manna from heaven, Jesus Christ, and we both need Him. We both need Him.

[20 : 12] So, we've talked about the countercultural motivation. It's an overflow of love. We've talked about the countercultural posture, reciprocity, equality, fairness, solidarity, right?

But what is all of this for? What's the point of Christian generosity? This is the third thing that really sets it apart. Why is it so important that we are motivated to give as an overflow of love and joy? Why is it so important that our posture be one of equality and solidarity and reciprocity toward those we seek to aid? And the answer is, according to this text, because this kind of generosity is the kind of generosity that doesn't bring glory to us.

All right, if I'm the source of generosity, then when you see me being generous, you say, wow, that guy is such a generous person. But the intention behind Christian generosity is not that people would say, wow, look at those people and how generous they are.

It's that they would say, look how generous God is. Look how generous God is. The goal is to bring glory to God. As he says in chapter 9, verse 13, when you give generously to those in need, they will glorify God.

[21 : 26] Not they will glorify you. Those Corinthians are amazing. They will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ. They'll say, that kind of generosity doesn't make sense.

People asking to give in the midst of their own crisis, out of money they don't even have, they'll say, that doesn't make any sense. And the only way to make sense of it is the gospel. Right?

The purpose of Christian generosity is not just to meet material needs. It's to point people to the only one who can meet our deepest spiritual needs. That's why we read in chapter 9, verses 6 to 15, the emphasis is not on the amount we give, but on our hearts.

Right? Paul actually says, listen, we should give what we've decided in our hearts beforehand to give. And he makes it very clear, you should give what you're able to give. Don't give out of what you don't have.

The Macedonians, that's a miracle. That's amazing. He says, as a general principle, don't give out of what you don't have. Give what you've decided to give. Give out of what you do have. Give. The main point he's trying to make is, it's not about how much you give, it's about the purpose behind your giving.

[22 : 34] God desires it to be something that we do cheerfully and joyfully. And so we need to ask, okay, well, if it's meant to be an abundance of love and joy, and we're called to give cheerfully and joyfully, where does all of that joy come from?

How do we get it? You know, because as I listen to myself saying this, I'm thinking, I'm a pretty stingy person, honestly. And I'm thinking, I'm not sure I can, how can I get this in me?

How can I manufacture this in me? And the answer is, you can't. We have to ask, what's the secret behind the Macedonians' generosity? And Paul says it at the beginning of chapter 8.

He says, they gave beyond their means, and they begged us to be able to give more. Verse 5, and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then by the will of God to us.

The reason that they were able to give so freely to others is because they had already given themselves to Jesus. And we ask, well, why would they do that?

[23 : 38] What motivated them to do that? And the answer is grace. And if you read these passages, the word grace just shows up again and again and again throughout these chapters.

Paul says this, the most important verse in the text, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might

become rich.

I think it's very hard to find a better summation of the gospel in all the New Testament. Everything that exists, he's saying, belongs to Jesus.

It's not ours. All of this belongs to Him. All power and glory are His. And yet Paul is saying that when Jesus, having everything, looked at us, and when He saw us in our spiritual poverty, and when He saw how hopeless our plight was, how lost we were, it says His heart was broken for us, that it was love and compassion that moved Him to act.

You know, in the world's eyes, you can be a very successful person. In the world's eyes, you can have a successful job and a nice house and a retirement account. But Jesus sees the truth about us, right?

[24 : 59] Jesus sees that we are spiritually destitute. He sees that we are spiritually homeless. He sees that we are starving to death because of sin, because we are trying to nourish ourselves with things that aren't meant to be spiritual food.

And we're wasting away. And so the gospel says that Jesus, seeing us in our destitution, gave up everything. That He became human, that He became homeless, that He became destitute, that He allowed Himself to be humiliated and tortured and killed, all to give us the chance to become spiritually rich through Him, through His abundance.

Now listen, here's the biggest difference you're going to find. There are many religions that say that God cares for the poor. Many religions out there, almost every religion that I've looked at, says somewhere that we should care for the poor.

Only one religion says God became poor. There's only one religion that says that. God became poor for us.

So as we think about our own generosity, as we think about how we think about giving to church, to other things that we support, as we think about how we make our budgets and how we plan our spending and where the priorities fall, as we think about all of that stuff, as we think about our motivation, as we think about the posture we take toward those we seek to help, if we are in the position to do that, as we think about the purpose behind all of this, we remember this.

[26 : 31] Christian generosity is not ultimately about giving your stuff away. It's about giving yourself away to the one who gave Himself away for you.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You and recognize right away that this is not something we can manufacture or produce through willpower.

It's something that has to come through Your Holy Spirit, that Paul again and again refers this as a grace received from You and a grace that flows out from us into the lives of others. And so I pray, Lord, as this entire service is a celebration of Your generosity, as this entire service is just an opportunity for us to receive Your gifts and blessings, Lord, Your nourishment, Your body and blood.

Lord, I pray that You would engender in us what we cannot do in our own strength, that kind of countercultural, otherworldly, God-glorifying generosity that has always been a mark of Your people.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Check this.