

A Sharing, Generous Church

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 1 to 15, and chapter 9, verses 12 to 15.

A reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

And they exceeded our expectations. They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God, also to us. So we urge Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

[1 : 16] But since you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in the love that we have kindled in you, see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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, through his poverty, might become rich.

And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year, you were the first not only to give, but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard-pressed, but that there might be equality.

At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn, their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality. As it is written, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.

[2 : 27] This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people, but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

And in their prayers for you, their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Thanks for that scripture reading, Maddie. Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Our Father, we want to hear from you, and we thank you that when your word goes forth, it does not return void or empty.

We thank you that your word is living and active, and we ask that it would bring much conviction today, that it would draw us near to you, and fix our eyes upon the grace that you've poured out upon us in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen. All right, so I'm going to let you in on a little secret. You know, back in the fall, me and Jonathan typically plan our full year preaching calendar, and originally when we had planned this preaching calendar, we planned for these past three weeks to be a miniseries on giving and generosity.

[3 : 56] Because as many of you know, we are in the middle of a capital campaign. We're trying to raise \$250,000 more to meet our \$600,000 goal to pay off this building and to create more usable space for our growing church.

And so we originally planned to preach a miniseries on giving after Easter, before everyone went on summer vacation. Because honestly, we'd really like to hit our goal this summer and just get this capital campaign behind us, get into August, our new ministry year, looking forward debt-free.

All right, so that was our original strategic plan. Three sermons on giving, just what you wanted, right? To promote this capital campaign, to pay off our debt, and glory to God, right?

Three sermons on giving. Now, if that sounds like, if that sounded to you like a bad idea, maybe even manipulative, like two pastors trying to maybe be more strategy-led than spirit-led, honestly, you're probably right.

And that's why we haven't done that. As we came toward the end of our last series in the Gospel of Mark, upon further reflection, Jonathan and I were convicted that actually we need to cast a far grander vision for our church.

[5 : 11] A far grander vision than just some immediate vision of paying off our debt in three to seven months. We need to cast God's vision. Something so much grander than just \$600,000 to own and upgrade this property.

So in the past two weeks, what you've heard Jonathan do is cast this wider vision of a church united under Christ, together under one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father, one Spirit, one body, and yet at the same time, rich in diversity, right?

Many members, many gifts, many talents, many callings. And we hope what you've heard so far isn't just a challenge to be more, give more, do more. But we hope that you've also heard an invitation to have more.

To have more of an experience of the presence and power of God. To have a deeper communion with Christ and His body, the church. To have a firmer sense of meaning and purpose and a Spirit-led direction in your life as you use all the gifts that God has given you to serve Him, to serve the church, and to serve the world.

And so today we're going to wrap up this series, yes, with a sermon on generosity and giving, because that still is a part of God's vision for the church. But listen, it's not for the sake of getting more out of this congregation.

[6 : 25] It's like accomplish our church's strategic financial objectives. It's not to alleviate our anxieties about debt and high interest rates, no. Christ's church exists not to raise capital, but to raise followers and worshipers of Jesus Christ.

Christ's church exists to lead people into deeper relationships with Jesus and His church through community and for the city. So as we open up this ancient letter from Paul today, what I hope to make clear is that God is far less interested in generosity from you and far more interested in being generous toward you.

And I want you to hear that that's my heart for you this morning as well. That's the heart behind this sermon. It's not so much that we want generosity from you, but that we want generosity for you as the people of God raised with Christ, heirs with Him, awaiting an imperishable inheritance which we did not earn and which we cannot lose.

As we look at Paul's heart this morning for the church that he planted in Corinth, we want you to know that this is our heart as well for Christ's church, Christ's church East Bay. That we as a church might join in the joy of Jesus' generosity.

And that's the main point. It's a challenge, it's an invitation as well to join in the joy of Jesus' generosity. Now let's start by looking at Paul's heart for this church in Corinth as he writes what, it's pretty much just like a fundraising letter.

[7 : 47] That's what Maddie just read. She read a fundraising letter from the Apostle Paul, an ancient one, all right? Now just a little bit about who Paul is addressing. Corinth was a city not unlike the Bay Area.

It's a bustling entrepreneurial hub that was being rebuilt by lots and lots of new money flowing in. This was a place where fortunes could be made, wealth could be created, even if you weren't necessarily born into the old money Roman aristocracy, you still had a chance to make it and gain the status and the influence that come with money.

At the same time, what was going on, Paul was writing to the church in Corinth during a particularly severe famine in the Roman world, one that lasted over 15 years. Maybe you remember Jesus, he predicted it, and so did the early church prophet Agabus, he predicted it as well.

And this is verified by historical records. We know that Egypt had had some very significant crop failures and that the Middle East was hit with a series of severe droughts.

And so by the time Paul was writing this letter, the Roman world was in the middle of this like over 15-year famine. This is around year 10 when Paul's writing this. And at this time, grain in Corinth was so scarce that even in wealthy places like Corinth, inflation was hitting so hard.

[9 : 02] According to one historical record, the price of grain was about eight times the normal price. But even as Corinth was being hit, the ones who were being hit the worst were the people in Jerusalem.

The church in Jerusalem is the church that Paul is trying to raise money for. The mother church, the first church, the church in Jerusalem. So Paul, you know, what he's doing is, you know, in addition to preaching and teaching and developing leaders and governing and church planting and really just trying to stay alive, right, he's now on his third missionary journey and he's become a fundraiser as well, trying to raise money for the struggling church in Jerusalem.

All right, so that's the context for our passage today. Now, as an apostle, there are all kinds of moves that he could have made, right, to raise this money, all kinds of levers he could have pulled, all kinds of favors he could have asked for.

He could have gone, hey, I'm an apostle. I'm an authoritative apostle. Give your money to where I say you should give it to. Or he could have gone that, you know, sappy, sad, guilt-inducing, sad, infomercial route and said, oh, look at those poor Jerusalem Christians.

Oh, we've got to give something to them. You should feel guilty that you're living so well, right? No, he doesn't do that either. He might have gone the televangelist route, like, hey, give your money and God's going to give you even more.

[10 : 20] Health and wealth, right? Prosperity gospel, he doesn't do that. And he doesn't even play the comparison card. Like, look how much the Macedonian churches have given and they are way poorer than you, so shouldn't you give more?

No. Even while bringing up the example of the Macedonian churches, notice how he phrases it in verse 1. And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

Did you catch that? He's calling their generosity a grace, a charis, a gift given to them by God. Paul's not even highlighting them, like, oh, how great the Macedonian churches are.

No, Paul, for Paul, what he sees and what he is eager to point out is not the Macedonian churches, but the gracious hand of God within the Macedonian churches.

See, for Paul, giving generously was not just some, like, righteous act to endorse, but a gift from God in and of itself. Look how he describes it in verse 2.

[11 : 19] In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. Like, God had so gifted these churches.

His favor and grace were so powerfully at work in them that even with their own trials, even in extreme poverty, they were somehow endowed by God with the privilege and honor of overflowing joyful generosity.

When Paul says in verse 1, I want you to know about the grace that God has given, he's saying that God has gifted them pretty much with a miracle. The miracle of generous giving.

Verse 3, For I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. Think about that. How do you give as much as you're able and then even beyond your ability? Think about that.

How does someone give beyond? Isn't that the very definition of a miracle? Like water from a rock, like manna from heaven kind of stuff. God worked a miracle out of these poverty-stricken churches in Macedonia.

[12 : 22] And look, this gift, it wasn't just a gracious gift of God that was financial in character, but it was a miracle of the heart. Look at verses 3 and 4.

Paul says, Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. Well, the gift here, the miracle here, is not simply money unexpectedly flowing from one church account to another church account.

No, the miracle here is a transformation of hearts. Hearts once only inclined towards self-service, now poured out in exceeding love for others.

That's a miracle. I want you to think about that for a second. What is the tougher, greater, more surprising miracle? For our church to somehow hit its goal, like tomorrow, through some mystery donor or some like crazy tax refund or something, 250K, boom, it's done, right?

Is that the most amazing miracle that you can fathom for our church? Or would it not be a greater miracle for God to so move the hearts of Christ Church East Bay that every member, 100% of us, might give beyond our ability, even pleading to do so, because we've counted such a great privilege to share in what this church is all about, leading people into deeper relationships with Christ.

[13 : 48] And as your pastor, I pray for this second miracle. I'll take this second miracle any day, over a quarter million dollars, the miracle of changed hearts, hearts inclined, desperately pleading to participate in the overflowing joy of generosity toward the work and the purposes of God.

Regardless of what poverty we may face or experience, that's the miracle that I want. That's the gift that I want for us. And I'm curious if you want that too.

But the question for us this morning, Christ Church, is do we want this miracle? Do we want this grace that God gave to the Macedonian churches? Or are we even able to see that as a gracious gift from God?

Like, do we see the generosity that God calls us to as just an edict to obey or an actual divine gift for us to enjoy? And do we really believe the words of Jesus who said it is more blessed to give than to receive?

Can we believe him? Will we take him at his word? Is it truly more blessed to give? I want to take you, I want us to consider for a moment, I want to take a moment to really consider that question this morning.

[15 : 03] I want to ask you to do a quick inventory of all the most joyful people that you've ever met in your life. An inventory of all the people who you most aspire to live like, of all the people you consider to have lived the fullest and most meaningful lives.

Get a picture in your head of that person or those people. Now, is it not true that the most joyful people we know, the people who live the fullest and most fulfilled lives, isn't it true that the people we most want to emulate are not the tight-fisted, self-protective, financially savvy penny pinchers, but the most generous people we know?

Is that not true? Now, why do you think that is? Why do you think that Jesus was right? And not just because of some biochemical link, maybe between generosity and endorphins or dopamine and pleasure in your brain, but isn't it true that the most generous person, the most generous people we know, are also the most committed and purposeful people we know as well?

The people who know exactly what they are living for, right? The people who've committed their lives to something far bigger than their own individual selves.

People who've discovered something worth living for, perhaps even worth dying for. And in his book, *The Second Mountain*, New York Times cultural commentator David Brooks, he writes, the people who radiates a permanent joy have given themselves over to lives of deep and loving commitment.

[16 : 38] Giving has become their nature, and little by little they have made their souls incandescent. If you closely look at joyful people, you notice that very often the people who have the most incandescent souls have taken on the heaviest burdens.

Do you not find that to be true in your life? I certainly find it to be true in the people that I know. And I think Apostle Paul would agree. There's something joyful about giving oneself, even when it's costly and burdensome, to something, to someone that's still absolutely worth it.

And for these Macedonian churches, what they gave themselves to, what was most worth it to them, was to give themselves, what does it say in verse 5? To the Lord. Verse 5, Paul says, Do you see that?

Deep and transcendent commitments to God and His work that led to joyful generosity. They gave themselves to the Lord and to His will. They recognized that they were not their own, but that they belonged to another.

So how could any of them withhold whatever they had, even in their poverty, everything that they had belonged to the Lord in the first place? And what did they have that they did not receive from Him?

[18 : 01] This is absolutely essential to a rightful understanding and practice of generosity. The Christian view of property and economics is radically different than the views on the right and on the left.

Those on the right say that everything an individual possesses belongs to him or her, and he or she may use it however they want. And then those on the left say that everything an individual possesses belongs not just to him or her, but to their whole community, and the community may determine how to use it.

But Christians know that everything an individual possesses neither belongs to him or her, nor even solely or primarily to our community, but first and foremost, it all belongs to the Lord.

It all belongs to the Lord, who doesn't just command obligatory generosity, but models joyful generosity and invites us into his joy. You know, when we talk about generosity, it can be so easy for us to think of ourselves as benevolent, charitable benefactors, you know, graciously donating to others at our own expense.

Oh, how gracious of us, right? But what if a more accurate picture is to see ourselves as money managers or as trustees? We were chatting about this in our Alameda community group last week.

[19 : 15] Shout out to Miriam Kim for this really good example. And she was saying that giving and generosity don't seem so burdensome when we realize that it's less about us trying to part ways with our own money and more like us realizing that our Father in Heaven has written a trust.

And he's already written out and directed exactly how we should distribute his estate and invest his assets. And she gave this example of how some of us have had to step into this role for our ailing parents who are unable to maybe make decisions for themselves and care for themselves.

So sure, their trust may designate us as the ones in control and having responsibility over all their assets now. But it's not like it's just all ours to spend on ourselves or however we want.

There is a right way and there is a wrong way. A responsible way and an irresponsible way to manage their estate. There's a way that honors them and their wishes and there's a way of dishonor as well.

And to not use the money to help provide and care for them or if they pass, to not distribute it as they intended to maybe their chosen non-profits or to their grandchildren or whatever it is, to disregard their will for what to do with all that they've entrusted to us.

[20 : 28] It would dishonor our parents. See, generosity isn't just about charity and benevolence. It's about a job that we've been given by our Father in Heaven.

It's stewardship. Our calling to generosity echoes out from God's original command to us in creation. Just as He generously shared life and existence with us when He didn't have to, He has called us to be fruitful and to multiply and to fill the earth not just for our own individual sakes but for His good and the good, His glory and the good of our neighbors.

God has created a world full of abundance. A world sustained by His presence with daily provisions for every need and desire. And the simple work that He gave us from the beginning to complete was to just generously and selflessly exercise our God-given authority and to share the plentiful bounty of our possessions as we all together bear tons and tons of fruit as we are faithful to the Lord.

This was God's intention for us. Generosity was meant to be natural. But you see, the reason we find generosity so hard and unnatural today is because of sin's entrance into the world.

And all the scarcity and the selfishness and all the sweat and tears and blood and thorns and thistles that came into the ground and all the enmity and hostility and violent competition that sin created between us and everyone else.

[21 : 58] People made in the image of God yet because of sin turned enemies and threats to one another. And this is why Cain and his descendants built those cities as they did. Not as dwelling places and temples where people might excel at worshiping God with one another and loving one another as themselves but as self-protective fortresses.

That's what Cain's descendants built. Self-protective fortresses built up against one another. Places where people sought to excel in the use of power and control and violence and oppression.

Whereas God's ideal for the city was always abundance and sharing and harmony. People excelling in generosity toward one another. Our cities, even with all the great things that our cities have done, all our triumphs, all our merits, our cities have always still been plagued by what?

Violence and inequality and scarcity and people just trying to excel in whatever it is that will get them ahead. Maybe it's software engineering today.

Hundreds of years ago, it was being good with the sword. Whatever it is, try to excel to try to get ahead, right? No matter how bad that is for them or their environment or for their neighbors.

[23 : 11] All right, so I kind of got us a little bit away from the text but let's bring it back to verse six. Okay? Generosity. This is why Paul sends Titus, okay?

Because of sin in this world, because of our, because of the way that generosity has become unnatural in this world, Paul goes and he sends Titus in verse six. Apparently, he's asking for a second gift.

If you look at verses 10 and 11, you'll see that this church in Corinth actually had already given a gift. So Paul's asking again. It's a double dip right here and Paul is sending Titus again to come and collect another donation because they need accountability.

In their fallen existence, generosity is no longer natural. So Paul sends Titus to point them back to the joyful task of completing the good work of generosity that they started. And he reasons like this.

Paul reasons that what good would it be for this church in Corinth to excel in a whole bunch of ways but not also in giving. Look at what he says in verse seven.

[24 : 18] But since you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in the love we have kindled in you, see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

And I want us to think about that. Try to imagine a church. Try to imagine even just an individual person who excels in all kinds of gifts in faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and even love and yet doesn't excel in giving.

Is that the kind of excellence that this world really needs? Paul is saying to this church in Corinth and perhaps God is saying to us today, Christ Church, hey, you're great and you excel in so many things.

You are a church full of talent and gifts and so many things to admire. But see that you also excel in giving. And don't you dare be content that you excel at everything else if you do not also excel in giving.

Because see for Paul, as it says in verse 8, generosity, generosity is a true test of the sincerity of our faith and our love. A true test of whether excellent faith and speech and knowledge and love and earnestness are really real.

[25 : 33] And this is a test for all of us as well. Now just to be clear, this is not Paul trying to set them up to fail. He's not saying that they have to prove themselves to him as a church that's just as generous as the Macedonian churches.

He's not saying that we have to prove ourselves to God by giving generously or else we're doomed. No, he's not commanding them to give with this test, but he's inviting them to give.

He's saying, I want you to prove me right about what I believe God's up to in your church, just as he did amongst the churches in Macedonia. I want you to prove the power of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit is at work within your church too.

I want to give you an opportunity to make your love and to make your faith evident to your brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. And this is so key to understanding Paul's fundraising letter and really to understanding the whole of the Christian life and how we're to live before God.

This little non-coercive comment here from Paul in verse 8 where he says, I'm not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love.

[26 : 42] Now, at first, if you think about that, if generosity is what Christians are supposed to do, then why would Paul say this, I am not commanding you? Like, would he say that about maybe other kinds of things?

I'm not commanding you to not murder. I'm not commanding you to not steal, to not commit adultery. Why is he saying that he's not commanding generosity?

Well, you know, as Paul is writing this fundraising letter trying to persuade the church in Corinth to give generously once again to the church in Jerusalem, he also knows that the law and mere commandments, they have no power to change our hearts.

Like, think about it. The laws are good at legislating and showing us the right behaviors, demarcating what is right and what's wrong. Like, oh, yeah, I murdered that guy. That was definitely bad, right?

It's a clear line when you have a law. Laws make that clear. It's clear when you murder. It's clear when you steal, when you lie. No one ever says, oh my gosh, I didn't know I was committing adultery.

[27 : 44] No one says that. Laws are good at pointing stuff out, but again, they cannot change our hearts. Whoever read thou shalt not steal or thou shalt not murder and thought to themselves, oh wow, this changed my life.

And not only am I not going to steal and murder, but because of these commandments, I'm gonna devote myself to giving more to other people and to helping them live their lives to the fullest. No one ever says that. We hear the command, thou shalt not murder, and we say, okay, good, I got it.

I'm good, right? But you see, the thing about generosity and its opposite greed is that these aren't just simple behaviors like murdering versus not murdering, right?

You can't just hear the command, don't be greedy and be like, okay, good, got it, right? Because greed and generosity are dispositions and inclinations in our hearts and that makes them much, much harder to recognize, right?

Like, tell me, how much does someone have to give before they are considered as generous enough, right? We know when someone is murdered or not murdered, but how much does someone have to give to know if they're generous or greedy, right?

[28 : 56] Is it like 0% is greedy, 5% is kind of generous, 10% is like satisfactory, generous? How do we determine that? It doesn't work like that, right? Generosity and greed are matters of the heart.

And so again, a command to just stop being greedy, we all know that that won't do a thing. We cannot merely be commanded into generosity. Generosity. Because think about it, right?

Generosity that's merely given out of obligatory obedience and duty and out of a fear of a threat or a punishment, it isn't true generosity. If I'm only giving because I'm afraid of what God's going to do to me if I don't, or if I only give because I want others to think well of me, or if I only give because I want to think well of myself as a generous person, don't you see what that is?

That's not generosity. That's called a transaction. We're purchasing goodwill from God or our neighbors or from ourselves. So if the Apostle Paul could not and would not command them into generosity in his fundraising letter, then this was going to fail, wasn't it?

What hope did he have that their hearts might actually be moved to give? You know, later on we find that this church does give. And the church in Jerusalem rejoices and they're held together by this gift.

[30 : 15] gift. So my question is, what was it about this letter? If he wasn't even willing to command them to give, how did certain people in Corinth with sinful hearts inclined only towards serving themselves, how are they motivated once again to give a second offering to this church in Jerusalem?

What power could possibly change any of our hearts? These hearts of ours that are so inclined towards selfishness and greed, these hearts that have defaulted to self-interest and self-protection and self-preservation at all costs in this broken and violent world where money is power and control and safety and security and influence, what could possibly get us to loosen our grips upon all we possess and share it with others?

Well, this is where we're going to end in verse 9. For you know, he says to them, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that you, through his poverty, might become rich.

What can change our hearts? What can free us from greed and unto generosity? Only the gospel. Only the grace of the Lord Jesus who showed us the ultimate act of generosity at great expense to himself, the prince of heaven who became poor and was laid in a manger who emptied himself, who divested himself of everything unto nakedness upon a cross, all to share his rich inheritance with greedy, undeserving people like us.

Jesus, crucified, risen, and coming again to share his imperishable new creation inheritance with us. He is the only antidote to our greedy hearts, the only way to a generous life.

[32 : 07] So the question is, will we walk in his way, trust in his truth, and live his life? I want to close with this excerpt from this old Scottish preacher, Robert Murray Shane.

Jonathan and I are both reading his Bible reading plan this year. He was also a well-known preacher. And he preached a sermon on this passage, 2 Corinthians chapter 8, just on verse 9. And he wrote this, Oh, my dear friends, if you would be like Christ, and you pray that you will be, become like him in giving.

Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor. But you might object, my money is my own. Well, Christ might have said, my blood is my own, my life is my own, and then where would you be?

But then you may object, but many people in need are undeserving. Well, Christ might have looked at you and said, look at these wicked rebels, should I lay down my life for these?

No, I will give to the good angels and the deserving poor. But no, he left the 99 sheep and came after the lost. He gave his blood to the undeserving.

[33 : 22] And yet you might object yet again, but people who I give my money to might abuse it. Well, Christ might have said the same thing with far greater truth.

Christ knew thousands would trample his blood under their feet, that most would despise it, that many would make his blood an excuse for sinning more, yet he gave his own blood. My dear Christians, if you want to be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, even to the vile and the undeserving.

Christ is glorious and happy and so shall you be. It's not your money I want, it's your happiness. Remember his own word.

It's more blessed to give than to receive. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, if we have been united with your son, Jesus Christ, who for our sake became poor so that we might become rich, what reason do we have to clench all that we possess as if it is ours and ours alone?

O Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit, in accordance with the grace of the gospel and your generosity toward us, would you loosen our grips on all that we believe to be our own and would we remember what do we have that we have not received?

[34 : 57] And don't we also have an inheritance that we did not earn and cannot lose because of the work of Christ? Oh God, would you transform us?

Would you work a miracle in this church? Change our hearts to make us the generous people that you want us to be, giving even beyond our ability in the name of Jesus and for the good of this world, we pray.

Amen.