

Equality through Generosity

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[0 : 0 0] Have you ever wondered why you are blessed in life? Now, some of you may feel anything but blessed, if you're doing it tough at the moment.

But perhaps if you look over a longer period back, you'll find things that others may not, and wonder why. And particularly for us living in Australia, where we are considered to be among the top 10% in the world, when it comes to material wealth.

So even the poorest among us, you could say, compared to the rest of the world, would be considered blessed. Do you think, for example, that it came down to your hard work?

That's why you're blessed. Or just random luck? Now, of course, if you're a Christian, you'll probably say, it's because God's blessing me. But then the question is, why do you think God has blessed you?

For doing something right in life? Perhaps, or being faithful to him? Well, in our passage tonight, it might surprise you to know that Paul gives the reason that we are blessed for the purpose of being generous to others.

[1 : 1 5] God gives more to some so that by their generosity, there is equality or sharing among his people.

Now, here in chapter 8, it's quite clear that we've begun a new topic, and it's on the touchy subject of money. Back then, just like now, nobody likes being told what to do with their money.

But Paul here thinks this is an important topic because what we do with our money is an expression of our faith.

It's a spiritual health indicator, if you like. You know, just as when the doctor sends us middle-aged men or women for a heart health checkup, they use this thing now where they calculate a calcium score to find out how much calcium you have in your heart.

Now, the calcium itself is sort of neither here nor there, but it indicates the amount of plaque that is in your heart, which is where the risk for heart attack is. So, the calcium itself, you know, is not the big thing, but it shows and points to something else, which is the plaque.

[2 : 2 8] Likewise, our giving then, or generosity, Paul says, points to something else, and that something else is the indication of the health of our faith.

Healthy Christians are generous Christians. And Paul persuades the Corinthians of this by giving three examples in his letter today. First, he looks at the example of their fellow Christians in the Macedonians.

Second, he looks at the example of Jesus. And thirdly, he points to their own prior commitments as an example. And with each, Paul then provides reasons for generosity.

So, let's look at them. The first, the Macedonians, verse 1. 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 the service to the Lord's people.

[3 : 3 9] Now, as a general rule, us parents know that it's never right to compare our children between siblings or with other people's children. But here, Paul seems to be doing just that, comparing.

But he's doing that deliberately because sometimes as parents we do that to bring out the best in our children. And so, likewise, Paul is trying to bring out the best in the Corinthians.

He's doing it for their own good. Now, the Macedonians, I have to say, their example is really too good not to share, is it? Their generosity, if you read it, the amount of things that Paul writes of them is just astonishing.

Firstly, it occurs while they are in extreme poverty, not riches. Secondly, while they are under severe trial, not when things are going well. And yet, they are overflowing with joy, welling up in rich generosity.

So generous were they that, thirdly, they gave beyond their ability, not just within their means. And, fourthly, they didn't need to be asked. Perhaps this was a subtle dig at the Corinthians themselves. [4 : 51] But, verse 3, they did so entirely on their own, urgently pleading for the privilege, privilege, not burden, of sharing in the service to the Lord's people.

And here, I think the Lord's people refers to the Christians that are in Jerusalem who are also having a hard time. Now, why were they doing this? Because, first and foremost, as it says in verse 5, they gave themselves to the Lord, and then, by the will of God, also to us, the apostles.

This was part of their worship to God, a response to God's prior grace in their life, shown to them through, amongst other things, Paul's ministry. It was simply a natural expression of their faith. But, when God's grace works in our lives, it overflows in generosity to others. We can't help but want to do it.

And we know from experience that's true, whether it's receiving it or giving it. When we truly love someone, we can't help, can we, but want to express it in tangible ways.

[6 : 00] Well, Paul now is sending Titus, he says, so that the Corinthians can do the same. So, let's keep going. Verse 6, we urge Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

But since you excel in everything, in faith, speech, knowledge, complete earnestness, and in the love we have kindled in you, see that you also excel in this grace of giving. You see, if we read the letters of Paul to them, we see, don't we, that they sort of make much of their faith.

They sort of boast about it. Well, Paul says, if that's true, here's your chance of proving it, by excelling in the grace of giving as well. Well, Paul then turns now to the second example of Christ. And it's in one sense that if the Macedonians were poorer than the Corinthians, now Paul gives another example that's on the other end, that Christ is richer by far than them, and yet shows generosity.

So, verse 8, I'm 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.

[7 : 22] The Corinthians had claimed to be rich, but here's an example of the Lord Jesus, who being rich, yet became poor. He did that by leaving his Father in glory and giving his life to us.

This is a model the Corinthians could emulate. After all, Paul says, how did we all come to be rich in the first place? Was it not through Christ's sacrifice for us?

We're only blessed because God's grace to us has come in Lord Jesus. Besides, Paul says, I'm not even asking you Corinthians to go so far as to be poor.

No, they just have to share their wealth so that there is equality. But this needed to be done willingly because generosity, by its definition, cannot be compelled, right?

Otherwise, you call it extortion or taxes, perhaps. But of course, this is exactly how the Corinthians were. It wasn't that something new because with the third example, Paul reminds them that they're really committed to do so.

[8 : 31] And here's my judgment about what is best for you in this matter, verse 10. Last year, you were the first not only to give, but also to have the desire to give. 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. So no compulsion is needed because they had already committed to give. In fact, Paul even says they were the first to give, the desire to do so. Where they've fallen short is in following through. Perhaps they were being distracted by all these other pastoral issues in the church.

But Paul says, now's your time to come back together again and be united in completing this commitment. All they needed to do was give according to their means, not even beyond, not like the Macedonians.

So the bar is slightly low, isn't it? Now, in a sense, you can say that God didn't need the Corinthians to provide for the Christians in Jerusalem. You know, God can raise it from any number of places.

[9 : 45] But Paul insists on challenging the Corinthians with it because, as I said, this is for their good. It's not just for the benefit of the Christians in Jerusalem, but also for the Corinthian church as well.

He wanted them to be part of God's aims for generosity. And these aims are the focus of the next part of the passage. So in verse 13 to 15, and these are the key verses, I think, he writes, Our desire is not that others may 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.

Now, I've often pondered about this point, and the more I think about it, the more I marvel, really, at how ingenious God has really set all this up.

You see, Paul says God's goal is equality or fairness. That is, he has no desire to see that some people have too much and others have too little.

[11 : 05] But, how he achieves this, is by not giving everyone the same of everything. Why not? Because if you think about it, a world where there's full equality, where everyone is equal, actually leaves no room for generosity or grace.

It removes, does it not, the need for mutual dependence. When I'm as good as you are in every respect, and you have the same as me in everything, then we don't, you know, we just become self-reliant, don't we?

We've got everything. Why do we need to look to others? It might even lead to unhealthy rivalry. But when one person has more initially than another of something, then there's room for generosity, isn't it?

Then equality or sharing can be achieved via generosity. Now, the election is now over, so I can say this safely without being accused of trying to influence anyone's vote.

But if you think about it, that's the difference, isn't it, between taxes and generosity. If you think about it, government welfare funded by taxes actually breaks the connection between the giver and the receiver.

[12 : 28] However, people seldom think that they're being generous when they pay taxes, right? We're compelled to do so. We resent it, don't we, as a result.

But notice when we ask to give charitably, willingly, there's a wholly different reaction, isn't it? People actually take joy in doing it.

And so often we have appeals, don't we, of, you know, bringing food to give to those in need, or whatever to give to this or that charity. People actually, when they do it willingly, have a great sense of joy in giving, don't they?

Now, please don't get me wrong. As I said, this is not a political speech. There are places for tax in our society to fund essential services and, you know, to use, if you're an economist, use them as macroeconomic levers and price signals.

But, in God's economy, He's allowed, and dare I say, He's even ordained inequality for a reason. And let me be clear as well, I'm not talking about equality in value or status.

[13 : 40] We're all made equally in His image. But, in His scheme of things, He's chosen to give some of us different gifts and talents. Some are richer, others are poorer.

Some are older with experience, and others are younger with energy. These differences or inequality enables generosity, doesn't it?

What you have more of allows you to be generous to those with less. So that, in turn, those with more of something you don't can be generous to you.

That's God's genius, isn't it? And so, I think we ought to focus on being generous with what we have, rather than sometimes being bogged down, aren't we, with what we don't, and start comparing.

Because then, we experience both the blessing of being generous, and we allow others to bless us with their generosity. Now, the remainder of the chapter is sort of a bridge to chapter 9.

[14 : 42] And I'll say more about that next week, because I was umming and ahing about whether to include this in this week's passage or next, but it was getting too long for next week's passage, so I read it today. But essentially, what Paul is doing, he's explaining the type of people that he's sending to the Corinthians to do this collection.

But right at the end, in verse 24, he mentions what the Corinthians can do to receive Titus and the other brothers when they come. So if you look right down there, 23, I think, yep.

As for Titus, he's my partner and co-worker among you. As for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and in honor to Christ. Therefore, show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you so that the churches can see it.

As I said, I'll explain more of this next week, but Paul says here that being generous, but by being generous, the Corinthians are also giving these men proof of their love.

Now, whether it's love for these men or love for the Christians in Jerusalem or maybe even just love for God, probably not clear, but regardless, this generosity is a demonstration of their love.

[15:53] And it demonstrates not just to the Corinthians themselves, confirming in their own hearts, but it actually confirms it in those who receive it as well. And we all know that gift-giving is a love language, isn't it?

Even if it's not a preferred method for some of us, it helps those we love to know that they are loved, doesn't it? So an important thing, I guess, as we look at this passage today is to remember the reason for generosity, why it happens, but more importantly as well, to consider how to apply it to ourselves.

How are we going with our generosity, which is your third point down there. And I want to say that this is a question we all need to answer ourselves individually. We're not to be judging others. We're to look into our own selves and work out our own generosity and how we measure up. But of course, we can do it collectively as a church as well to ask ourselves whether we, as a church collectively, can be more generous.

So I'll leave you to think about that for yourself personally, but I guess I want to just offer some of my own observations as to how we are. Are we, to use the examples in the passage today, are we more like the Macedonians or are we more like the Corinthians?

[17:17] And I have to say that over the last months and years, I'm very encouraged to see that there are many examples of Macedonian generosity in our church.

So I think, by and large, there's many of you here who are very generous. And I remember, for example, when we first went into lockdown, that some people were still giving with cash and were not passing the bags, but immediately, some people were keen to give by direct debit because they didn't want to miss out on the duty of giving just because they couldn't come to church.

Likewise, we did set up a benevolent fund for those who were doing it hard over the lockdowns and people were giving to it. When, for example, Ronald Suar, who we prayed for today, they made an appeal for funds to help him in Myanmar.

Well, people gave. So there's a lot of examples of generosity amongst us. And I guess one good way to describe or think about this is in that passage that we read in the book of Deuteronomy tonight.

You notice in chapter 15 and verse 8, God was giving instructions about lending and cancelling debt. But in verse 8, he says, be open-handed and freely lending to whoever is in need.

[18:35] And then the opposite is actually in the verse before, verse 7, it's to be tight-fisted, which is tantamount, if you see there, to being hard-hearted.

So the image of generosity, if you want to think about it, is that of an open hand. The opposite is a tight fist, isn't it? An open hand has the attitude of always being ready to give almost spontaneously as and when the need arises.

There's an idea here of not being very calculative, you know, working out and keeping score. Am I being generous enough already? You know, how come I've done this and they haven't done that? Generosity with an open hand doesn't keep score in that regard. So, for example, if someone here, just giving you a random example, needs a lift to church, it's not about, you know, then calculating, how much more petrol would I be, you know, spending now that it's at \$2 and whatever per litre because I've gone out of my way and then sort of expecting, okay, that was \$20 more.

I hope they're going to then return, you know, \$20 in some form or other. That's not generosity, is it? A good example of it is, for example, some of you just leaving extra for chicken and chips next Sunday.

[19:48] I'm not saying you have to do that next Sunday, but it's just doing that. I haven't got the change. I know I have to put whatever 10 in, but I'm going to put a bit more. It doesn't matter. Why? Because, you know, well, that extra money could be paying for somebody else or going to church.

And the same with other events where people have paid more than the price so that others can come if they can't afford it. Of course, we can think of a lot of other ways.

And maybe we are already Macedonians, but it's worth thinking, is there perhaps one or two more things that we could do anyway as far as generosity is concerned?

Perhaps some of you are very spontaneous as open hand givers, responding when the need arises, but need to maybe be a bit more intentional and plan our giving and follow through on it, just like the Corinthians were being asked.

And I'm also not just talking about things in church, but if you think about it, many of our brothers and sisters overseas are in greater need than us, aren't they?

[20 : 53] Some of them live in war zones, others are persecuted. And so that's why I mentioned that CMS, Lasting Hope Appeal. I do encourage you to give if you can so that we can support our brothers and sisters, and many of them are supporting missionaries so that they can then serve brothers and sisters in Christ, living in these countries.

And you know what? Many of them know that we support them, so Ronald particularly knows when we support them. And this is a great encouragement for them, proof of our love, isn't it?

And of course, the last thing, I guess, is to think that this is not just about money, is it? It's not about the money, money, money, as Steph sung. Some of us might not have much by way of income or assets, but perhaps our generosity in giving is in our time or skills.

So perhaps, kids hope, if you've got the time, isn't it? Being open-handed with those things is also generosity. At the end of the day, though, I want to come back to the point that I said at the start. That is, generosity should arise as an expression of our faith, willingly. This ought not to be. I hope you haven't heard this as me giving you a guilt trip.

[22 : 09] If you've heard it that way, then you've heard it wrongly. Because what we want to do is to do it gladly because we've experienced God's own generosity to us.

We've seen his riches because of his son, Jesus. And then we say to ourselves, nothing is going to stop me from imitating my Lord and Savior.

That's how it should be. Let's pray. Father, thank you for generously giving to us first eternal life and hope for which we have done nothing to deserve.

Thank you for your son who, though being rich, became poor so that we might become rich. Prompt us as to how we've been more generous with all that we've been blessed with.

Help us to see that we have been given more so that we can show generosity to others. Teach us to do it willingly and cheerfully. In Jesus' name we pray.

[23 : 07] Amen.