

Cultivate Generosity

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Preacher: Cedric Moss

- [0 : 0 0] This morning's sermon is titled, Cultivate Generosity, and it is the third of seven similar sermons that I'll be preaching throughout the year.
- ! And each of these sermons is calling us to cultivate a particular Christian value. The first sermon was Cultivate Community, the second Cultivate Servanthood, and the third Cultivate Generosity.
- And so there are four sermons remaining, and they are Cultivate Honor, Cultivate Humility, Cultivate Respect, and then Cultivate Gratitude.
- And once again, the motivation behind these sermons is that among us as a people in general, and in this congregation, no doubt, these values are not near as common as they used to be.
- And so with God's help, we want to cultivate them. And that's the effect that I pray that these sermons will have on us, that they will lead us to cultivate these values.
- [1 : 1 4] And so we consider this morning the third value, generosity. And the call to all of us is Cultivate Generosity. I will allow for questions and answers at the end, so if you have any questions during the sermon, please make a note of them.
- 2 Corinthians chapter 8, we'll be reading verses 1 through 7. Paul writes, We want to remind you, 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 the extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.
- For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.
- Accordingly, we urge Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.
- [2 : 5 1] But as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in love for you, see that you excel in this act of grace also.
- Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for the privilege of being able to sit under the preaching of your word. Lord, would you watch over your word as it is proclaimed in this moment?
- And would you guard me in my preaching and guard us all in our hearing? Lord, help us to hear these words as a word from you.
- And God, I pray that you would use your word to transform our hearts and lives. For your glory we pray. Amen. For this past week, in Discipleship Foundations class, the chapter that we covered in the book Habits of Grace is titled The Dollar.
- It's a chapter on giving, and the author, David Mathis, opens the chapter with this simple but profound statement. He writes, For the Christian, the issue is not just that we give, but how.

[4 : 25] And then he goes on to say, One of the effects of the gospel going deeper into our souls is that it frees our fingers to loosen their grasp on our goods.

generosity is one of the greatest evidences of truly being a Christian. Now, you may or may not agree with that last statement, but here's what I would say.

The witness of scripture bears out the truth that generosity is indeed one of the greatest evidence, evidences of truly being a Christian.

And this passage that we have come to this morning is one bit of evidence that that statement is true, and it helps us to see what Christian generosity looks like.

This letter of 2 Corinthians is one of the more difficult letters that the apostle Paul wrote. The letter was difficult because Paul was writing to a church with whom he had a strained relationship.

[5 : 41] And in light of the strained relationship, it is quite interesting that the apostle Paul even raised the issue of money. But he did.

And in the verses that we just read, the apostle Paul refers to the Macedonian churches as an example of sacrificial giving to motivate the Corinthian churches to likewise give sacrificially.

And this morning, I seek to do the same. I want us to consider the generous giving of the Macedonian churches in response to the grace of God that was given to them so that we might be provoked, so that we might be inspired by their example and thereby cultivate generosity as a church.

From this passage, we're able to see that the apostle Paul was raising a relief offering for the benefit of some saints who evidently had some significant material needs.

the Corinthian church had started to give towards his offering. And for reasons that are not stated in the text, there was some pause in their giving.

[7 : 02] They ceased to continue to give. And so the apostle Paul is making a fresh appeal to them to complete the giving that they had started.

And he uses the example of the generous giving of the Macedonian churches to provoke them to give in a similar manner. So these verses, verses 1 through 7, are about generosity and giving.

So what does this passage have to say to us about generosity and giving? Here's what I believe it says to us. Generosity and giving is based on God's grace and according to our means.

Generosity and giving is based on God's grace and according to our means, or according to our ability. Based on God's grace, according to our ability.

Or to put it another way, there are two factors, basic factors, that should determine what generous giving looks like.

[8 : 17] They are, number one, God's grace, which is the heart with which we give, and then our means, which is the determinant in terms of the extent to which we can give.

So we can state it, we can state those two things this way. Number one, generous giving is based on God's grace. And number two, generous giving is according to our means.

So I want to consider these two aspects of generous giving in the remainder of our time, beginning with the first one, generosity and God's grace.

Generosity and God's grace. This passage helps us to see that sacrificial giving is not done in a vacuum. It's based on God's grace. Notice in verse one, what the Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians.

He says, So what we see is before Paul talks about the generosity of the Macedonian churches, he roots their generosity in the grace of God.

- [9 : 42] He says, Now we should be very clear that when Paul talks about the grace of God that had been given among them, he is not talking about grace in salvation.
- He's not talking about grace in salvation. This is a subsequent mention of grace. And clearly what he's talking about is God's grace in generosity.
- God's grace was given among them. Now this is not to say that God's grace in salvation that comes to us does not make us generous as well.
- It does. But Paul is talking about something beyond that grace in salvation. And he's talking about a grace that God gave to be generous.
- I think we should hear this this morning. God gives grace to be generous. But notice what else Paul says.
- [10 : 52] In verse five, he says, that the Macedonian churches gave themselves first to the Lord. And what this speaks about is this speaks about recognizing the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives and the commitment to follow him.
- Rightly understood, how we handle our goods is not an issue when we have settled the issue of Lordship. When we have truly settled the issue of Lordship.
- If Jesus is Lord of our lives, he is Lord of our goods. He is Lord of our possessions. I remember the church I grew up in. There was this perhaps overused saying that they would say all the time.
- And it was, if Christ is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all. Because that's what Lordship means. That's what it means to be Lord. To be Lord is to be totally over all.
- And when we say that Christ is our Lord, we subject our lives to his leadership and to his direction. So what Paul is saying about the Macedonian believers is that they had given themselves to the Lord in recognition of his Lordship.
- [12 : 10] And the result of that is it causes them to view their possessions in a very different way. This is true for us as well.
- We loosen our grip on our possessions and we are more generous when we recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the owner, not only of our lives, but he is the owner of all that we have.
- And he is responsible for all that we ever will be. And so for the Macedonians, these Macedonian believers, in their generous, voluntary, sacrificial act of giving, the Macedonians were actually modeling Christ himself.
- It was a sacrificial act. Christ gave himself, he laid his life down for sinners. And the Macedonian believers, sacrificial giving was reflective of Christ's giving of himself himself on the cross on their behalf.
- And this is true for us as well this morning. God's grace works in our lives to make us generous. Versus salvation, because it is impossible for us to be mindful of the grace of God that we have received and then not have a willing heart to be generous.
- [13 : 54] The dots aren't connecting when we have received the grace of God, the generous grace of God, and then we are not ourselves being not just generous, but sacrificially generous.
- generous. We who are truly mindful of the grace of God that we received in salvation through Jesus Christ through his death on the cross must be willing to sacrificially be generous.
- Again, it's impossible to truly give ourselves to the Lord and not have a heart that is willing to give sacrificially. And this giving of ourselves to the Lord is not at this point in giving, as for the Macedonians, referring to salvation.
- The Lord is the one who takes divine initiative in salvation. So our giving ourselves to the Lord is really in response to what he has done for us.

And so for those of us this morning who have received this gracious mercy of Christ, we know him, it should lead to us being willing to give sacrificially because we have been the recipients of amazing sacrificial grace from Christ through his death on the cross.

[15 : 33] What we see from this account, though, is that the giving of the Macedonians even surprised the Apostle Paul and those who were with him. He tells us that he didn't even expect these poor Christians to give.

Look at what he says in verse 4. he says that they were begging earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.

And he says, and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

Just think about that. The example that we often see is when somebody gives a large, significant donation, some wealthy person, you know, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, men like them who give away hundreds of millions of dollars and they are often touted.

But what we find in Scripture is that those are not the ones who are praised. those are not the ones who are given all the accolades. Here we see the Apostle Paul holding up the Macedonian believers as an example.

[17 : 08] He said they begged to be able to give even though among themselves there was a severe test of affliction and they were extremely poor.

And that should speak to us this morning. Because oftentimes when there are opportunities to give, it is so easy for us to look at our particular circumstances and feel that we have too many trials or to feel that we have too many things going on to even consider giving.

But we should consider the example of the Macedonian believers. believers, despite their own test of affliction, despite their own extreme poverty, they were generous. And they weren't generous because they were asked to be generous.

They insisted, they wanted to give. It seems like the Apostle Paul doesn't say he didn't have the faith to ask them, but he just didn't ask them.

He just didn't approach them concerning this offering because he felt no doubt that their circumstances were such that he wouldn't ask them to give.

[18 : 22] They insisted that they should give because they wanted to help others and it was a sacrifice to do that. And so Paul uses them as an example of generous giving to inspire others to give.

Now, starting in verse 6, Paul begins to transition and what he is doing here is having laid out the example of the Macedonian believers, he is now using the example to transition to speak to the church at Corinth and to call them to follow in a similar way as the Macedonians and give.

Paul is at this point in verse 6 transitioning to the primary reason that he wrote this section of his letter. He's calling the Corinthians to be inspired by the example of the Macedonian churches and he says to them to complete the act of grace in the form of the relief offering that they started.

And I want you to see this in verses 6 and 7 that two times he refers to the offering for the saints as an act of grace.

It's an act of grace. The sacrificial giving to the needy saints was an act of grace. It's an evidence of a heart that has been touched by the grace of God.

[20 : 09] Yes, in salvation, but also to be able to be moved when needs arise in our midst. You know, we often hear that first impressions are lasting impressions, and brothers and sisters, we do well to consider the first impressions we get of the early disciples in the book of Acts.

In Acts chapter 2, where we see the things that mark them. they were marked by prayer, and they were marked by gathering, and they were marked by adhering to the word of God, but they were also marked by concern for one another, and by generosity.

And they were doing radical things. They were parting with property, some who had them. They didn't have to. They were not living communally where they owned all things together.

Peter makes this clear in Acts 5, when he says to Ananias, he said, wasn't the property yours before you sold it?

And then he said to him, and weren't the proceeds yours to do whatever you wanted to do after you sold it? Meaning, he had private property. They had private property in the church.

[21 : 31] And to sell property was to sell inheritance. It was to sell a legacy. It was to sell something that had been passed on, something that was very precious.

But that's what the grace of God does for us. The grace of God moves upon us to act in ways that we ordinarily would not, and in ways that the world does not.

And Paul says this giving into this offering was an act of grace. Now again, we don't know why the Corinthians paused their giving.

Paul doesn't say, but he urges them to renew it and to complete it. He says to them, you've excelled in all these other gifts.

You need to excel in this gift as well. you need to excel in the gift of giving as well. And brothers and sisters, let us take that to heart as well. Let us hear this call to excel, to seek to excel in the gift of giving, this gift of generously giving.

[22 : 53] So we see that God's grace both motivates and enables us to be generous in our giving. That's the first point.

Generous giving is based on God's grace. My second point is this. Generous giving is according to our means. Generous giving is according to our means.

So let's consider now generosity and our means. Notice how this worked for the Macedonians. In verse three, Paul tells us that the Macedonians, look at what he says in verse three.

He says, they gave according to their means. They gave according to their means.

He says, as I can testify, and beyond their means of their own accord. Now, let me just pause to say something practical to help us to appreciate the point about how we are to give in accordance with our means.

[24 : 10] it is reasonable to conclude that what the Macedonians gave, based on their circumstances that are described for us, was not a whole lot.

I don't think it was significant. I don't think it was really anything in and of itself to brag about. I don't think it was anything that really hit the need in any significant way.

But that wasn't the point. point. That wasn't the point. And that is the way it is among the people of God. We do not, or we should not, and we are wrong to simply celebrate large gifts in a vacuum.

So it's wrong to do that. It is wrong to highlight what we think is generous in a vacuum. Because Paul is making the point about the Macedonians and he's simply saying that what is important is that they gave according to their means.

And he says, but their generosity is really seen in the fact that they even gave beyond their means. Not only did they give out of their severe affliction and their extreme poverty, but they also gave beyond what it appeared they should have been able to give.

[25 : 41] And what this says to me is that the Macedonians sacrificed even more beyond the already sacrificial position that they were in.

That's the point that Paul is seeking to make. Not that their gift was large, but that their gift was in accordance with their means.

Their gift obviously was a sacrifice. And the point is that generosity is relative. It is according to our means.

It is according to our ability. So for example, you can have two persons giving the exact same amount to a particular cause and one gives a generous gift and the other one not a generous gift.

Or another example, you could have one person who quantitatively gives a much larger gift than someone else, but relative to their ability, the one who gave far less in a quantitative way, was far more generous in what he or she gave.

[27 : 02] And this is the point that we should see from the Macedonians. This is the second part of what generous giving looks like. It is based on our means.

It is based on our ability to give. Let's turn to Mark chapter 12.

I want to read just three verses there. Mark chapter 12. It is a parable, actually not a parable, it is a story in the life of Jesus that bears out this same principle about how generosity is based on our means.

Mark chapter 12, beginning in verse 41. It says, and he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums, and a poor widow came and put in two copper, small copper coins, which make a penny.

And he called his disciples to him and said to them, truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box.

[28 : 36] And they all contributed out of, for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty, because she has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

Whenever we find ourselves being moved in a vacuum by large gifts, we're not thinking the way Jesus is calling us to see and to think.

He called his disciples to him because he wanted to teach them a lesson that was contrary to the world. The rich, no doubt, thought that they were doing wonderful things by giving their large gifts.

But they weren't sacrificing. They were simply just giving because they were able to give. And Jesus is saying that among his disciples we need to be thinking differently.

We need to be thinking not so much in terms of the size of our gifts, but the sacrifice of our gifts. It's not to consider just the amount that is given, but also to consider the stock from which it is given.

[29 : 45] given. And that's why we should never compare ourselves to others in our giving because at the end of the day that giving is relative to our ability and more than that, that giving is under the sight of God who alone is able to determine the true extent of our generosity.

I believe that from what Jesus says here, we can make a pretty safe conclusion that generally speaking, the most generous people among the people of God tend to be the poorest among us, not the wealthiest among us.

The most generous people among the people of God, generally speaking, tend to be the poorest among us, not the wealthiest among us.

Sacrificial giving is according to our means, and generosity is according to our means, not the monetary amount that we give.

We're not called to give the same amounts, but we're called to the same generosity. One way we can think about it is that when we participate in any effort of giving, the one thing that we should all have in common is not the amount that we give, but that what we give should have the same smell of sacrifice on it, some measure of the scent of sacrifice in what we give.

[31 : 37] love. And this is especially true in times of need. I continue to marvel at the providence of the Lord for us as a church.

It's very encouraging to me. In last month's Table Talk magazine, there's an article by Randy Alcorn, and the title of it is Generosity as a Witness.

I encourage you to read it if you have not read it in the April issue of Table Talk. It's an excellent article, and what he points out in the article is that the world can benefit from seeing the church's generosity as an attractive witness to the grace of Christ.

And he's not violating him. He does it in a wonderful way in the article. He talks about how our giving is to be in secret, and we're not supposed to sound a trumpet, but he still makes the case for how the generosity of the people of God can be of benefit to a watching world.

And that is what we see in the book of Acts, in Acts chapter 2, where it talks about how the early disciples, they grew in favor with God and with man. Because there are some acts of generosity, that even when we hide them in the initial act, it's very hard to hide it forever.

[33 : 15] Some acts become known, not because we broadcast them, not because we intentionally seek to make them known. The very nature of them is that they become known.

giving. And then this past Wednesday, we covered the chapter on giving in the habits of grace. And this sermon was in no way connected to trying to coordinate these things.

The sermon was planned back in December, had no idea what the April issue of Table Talk would have had. As a matter of fact, even if we look at the way that the habits of grace were scheduled, I mean, there were so many changes, some nights we didn't get through everything, no way to coordinate all that.

Yet, these are all converging for us saying the same thing. things. And then in addition, there is no way that I could have coordinated all of these to coincide with the timing of the announcement of the Benevolence Teams Benevolence Project.

No way I could have coordinated all that. And I believe this is the kindness of the Lord to us. I mean, one thing matched with another, you can say, well, that's coincident, but these are four things just matching together, the timing of them being simultaneous.

[34 : 46] And I believe that the Lord is speaking to us as a church about growing in generosity. And most of you, if not all of you, are aware, Brother Lyndon announced it during the announcements, that we are banding together as a church to, purchase a vehicle for a member who has a significant need for transportation.

It's quite interesting that in our care group, when we were talking about this particular need, Alexine said, oh, you know what? I just saw her walking from the food store with bags of groceries and I took her home.

And this is something that so many of us just take for granted. We jump in our cars, we go to the food store, and we don't have a thought about lugging bags of groceries in the hot sun or in the pouring rain water.

And even the fortune that one pays in moving back and forth with public transportation and children and the inconvenience of it all many, many times.

And so we have an opportunity to do good. we have an opportunity to model the Macedonians.

[36 : 19] And here's what I want to say to us, all of us. There is some measure, some way that we can all participate in this project, down to the children.

Often times, children are given allowances or some of them have small jobs where they earn income. Parents, let us envision children, and talk to them and encourage them to be generous.

Not just to give, not just to give. Let us think about being generous. Because the truth is, we have given to and sacrificed for far lesser things.

I was just looking in our closet. I don't know why I did. I just glanced on the two sides of the closet and I just saw clothing. And I thought to myself, you know what, we probably don't need to buy clothes for two more years.

I know that's relative. Some of you probably think I should buy some clothes. My wife does. She thinks that I should buy clothes. But you know what?

[37 : 30] We're not running around naked. We have clothes. And we could give clothes to the Salvation Army and still have clothes. And yet, there will be some of us who will purchase more clothes, purchase more shoes, purchase more wigs and pieces.

And we have enough. And so I want to encourage us as a church. As the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthian church, he said, complete the work.

He said, complete what you started. I want to say to us, let's get going with this. Let's do this. We can do this by the grace of God. And again, this is not to try to use gimmickry or use any kind of underhanded way to cause you to give.

God forbid that I would do that. But I do want to encourage us to be moved, to be generous, not just in this act of giving, but to be generous people.

In the chapter we read in Habits of Grace on Wednesday, one of the questions that was asked was whether we had ever made a sacrifice even for what would be some of the normal necessities that we are accustomed to in order to give.

[39 : 05] to the needs of somebody else who was in a needy position. And brothers and sisters, if we can see evidences like that in our lives, that we're doing that, that's the grace of God at work.

That is an evidence of the grace of God, because one of the things about us is that we are by nature selfish. There's not a parent here this morning who would stand up and say, I had to, or I did not have to teach my child to be kind and to be generous.

My child was just kind and shared everything. No, we generally are selfish and we need to be taught to share and to be kind and to be generous. And God by his grace gives us opportunities to be able to do that.

It is so easy to give what we don't have or to say what we would do when we are not called upon to do it.

But it's a completely different story to do it when we are called upon to do it. And so we have an opportunity to give and to practice generosity.

[40 : 25] And this doesn't mean that once we give to this project and the project is done that we are all generous people and everything is going to be fine. We'll be generous for the rest of our lives.

No, this is yet an opportunity to be generous. But God will continue to give us opportunities and I pray that we would embrace those opportunities to be generous.

And so this morning no matter what our circumstances are, because sacrificial giving is not based on size. We can all give generously.

Let's conclude with prayer and then I'll entertain some questions if you have any. Thank you.