

Gracious Living II

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[0 : 00] It'd be great if you would open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 9, which Deb read for us on page 173. And I'm very aware that it makes people nervous and twitchy when the minister preaches on money.

It's one of those, it feels a bit like an unnecessary, well, a necessary but unpleasant activity, often in response to a shortfall. And in the finer churches, we only speak about money in hushed tones and only very rarely so as not to offend anyone.

And I think people are suspicious that when we talk about money, it's because we haven't planned properly or we're not trusting God adequately or there's some sort of financial crisis about to break out upon the congregation.

So we do a bit of fundraising and then we get back to what we're really here for. The only trouble is that when you read the words of Jesus in the New Testament and the letters of the apostles, they're very clear that how we earn our money and how we spend our money and how we think about our money is one of the clearest evidences of whether we have experienced God's grace in any genuine way whatsoever.

Dan last week began in 2 Corinthians 8 and here in chapter 9. The apostle Paul holds up generosity as the mark of true Christian experience.

[1 : 28] We cannot live before God. We can't say, Lord, bless my life, I want to live as a disciple of yours and have this area off limits, no talkies. There can be no spiritual growth, no true spiritual growth unless we place this area into God's hands.

And over the past few years, I've had a growing conviction that we need to speak about these things, this thing, completely independently of all considerations of our budget, irrespective of whether we are doing well or poorly financially.

Actually, irrespective of whether you are doing well or poorly financially. So, in consultation with others, I've decided twice a year we'll have two little bites at this cherry so that our hearts might be set on the things of God.

And during the summer, I elected for this Sunday and last Sunday. And I didn't know this was going to be stir-up Sunday, but it's very appropriate, I think. See, if this passage is true and if the gospel is true, as we learn to give, we become richer, not poorer.

And now you remember the background. The Apostle Paul is raising money for famine relief for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and he is right over in Greece writing to the Christians in Corinth, a wealthy, an arrogant, a comfortable congregation who had indicated they did want to help their brothers and sisters thousands of miles away.

[3 : 01] And the big picture in our section, chapters 9, verse 6 to the end, is that the Apostle Paul contrasts two different kinds of giving.

Just look at the first two verses, verse 6 and 7. The point is this, he says, which one, that's a great line for a fundraising exercise, isn't it?

The point is this, he who sows sparingly will reap sparingly and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Each one must do as he or she has made up their mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver, literally a hilarious giver. One kind of giving is sparing and stingy and we reach into our seed bag and we pull out the smallest bit of seed we can and throw it on the ground because it feels like when we throw it on the ground it's lost from us and goes away from us forever and all we've got to show for it is a lighter seed bag.

The other kind of giving is bountiful, blessing literally, generous. And that kind of giving is reaching into your seed bag and grabbing more than you can really afford and throwing it out on the ground because you trust that God will take that seed, will grow that seed silently and invisibly and it will bear a harvest which will bring thanksgiving back to God from all the seed that was his in the first place.

[4 : 36] And there is a world of difference between those two different kinds of giving. The sparing giver feels diminished when they give, like they're missing out or going without.

It's this feeling that somehow I need my seed bag full to feel secure. The generous giver looks at giving as an entirely different thing. It's not an exercise of my philanthropy.

It's an opportunity for God to use the resources that he gave me and to change them and transform them into something which can be remarkable. It is the difference between moral giving and gospel giving.

Moral giving is calculated. It's based on the fact I deserved what I've got, I've worked very hard for it, besides God owes me a level of comfort in this world. And gospel giving says, Lord, all that I have is yours, you own it anyway, please take what is mine and bring blessing to others through it.

And do you know what the difference is in God's eyes between those two different kinds of giving? It's got nothing to do with the amount of money that's given, it has to do with what's in our heart, our attitude, whether it's cheerful, thankful and believing.

[5 : 57] This has, this is far more than just a percentage. This has to do with whether we're gripped by God's grace and living according to the gospel. And let me just say, it's not just about money, of course.

When we speak about a generous and gracious lifestyle, we're speaking about the investment of our time and the generosity of life and attitude. You can't be generous with your money and mean in spirit.

So the question everyone always asks is, how should we give? How much should we give? Isn't that the question? And in the Old Testament, God said, you need to give the first 10% of all your income to me.

When we come to the New Testament, there's never a command that we give 10%. And so people breathe a big sigh of relief. And then we suddenly discover we're supposed to give according to the gospel and then we remember what the gospel is.

And if you look back in chapter 8, verse 9, this verse that Dan dealt with last week, chapter 8, verse 9, And the question is, do we owe God more or less than the Old Testament believers because of the death of Christ?

[7 : 25] There's a wonderfully practical way to discover whether I'm a moral legalist or whether I am a gospel Christian. If I'm a moral legalist, I'm going to say, giving 10% is completely ridiculous and unreasonable.

You can't expect me to give away my money like that. I've earned it. But the person who's touched with the grace of God will say, Jesus gave himself utterly and completely for me on the cross.

Following him means living and giving beyond my ability. It cannot mean any less than cutting into my lifestyle, can it? It's very interesting. You go through the passage for today.

In chapter 9, verse 12, the Apostle Paul speaks about the giving of money as the rendering of this service in verse 12. And the word in the Greek is the Old Testament word for sacrifice.

In other words, giving money is part of a life lived in open sacrifice to God. And if you're someone who says 10% is unreasonable, it means that the death of Jesus hasn't really begun to work in your heart because true generosity comes from the Gospel.

[8 : 36] That's why the Apostle doesn't resort to commands. He wants to open our vision wider and higher and longer through the generosity of his people to show what God will do.

So, he uses this lovely metaphor of sowing and harvest and reaping and what he does is he tells us that there are three results, three outcomes, three different kinds of impact of genuine generosity and I want to just deal with them quickly with you.

The first and most obvious result of generous Christian giving is for those who receive the direct benefits of the gifts. But as you look through this passage you will see that the direct benefits were not just food and clothing.

giving. The giving of the Christians over in Corinth developed a direct spiritual bond with those in Jerusalem that the Apostle calls communion.

In fact, the contribution in verse 13 is the Greek word for communion. These Christians in Greece are world Christians. They have a world vision which I think is a very good name for an organisation.

[9 : 45] There they are in Corinth, right over there in Greece. They are offering to give to the needs of Jewish Christians right over in Jerusalem half a world away.

It's an entirely ridiculous notion in the ancient world. Those Christians in Jerusalem spoke a different language. They were from a different nation, a different race, a different culture.

This was a Greek congregation with its own issues in Corinth made up of people with names like Demosthenes and Tarabulsus giving to Jewish Christians on the other side of the world.

It's the exact opposite way that money was used in the Roman Empire. Money was always used to buy loyalty. It would have been looked at as completely absurd. They were giving it as a free gift, no strings attached, based on invisible things like the grace of God and the resurrection of Jesus.

It's like throwing money away. And it's not just the wealthy Corinthians who were giving money. Didn't Dan point out to us last week in chapter 8 that the country, bumpkin, poverty stricken cousins right up the top in northern Macedonia gave way beyond they could afford to give.

[10 : 59] Look back at chapter 8 verse 3. This is speaking about the churches in Macedonia. You see there, extreme poverty, verse 2, has overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part, verse 3 in chapter 8, for they gave according to their means and I can testify beyond their means of their own free will begging us earnestly for the favour of taking part in this relief of the saints.

Isn't that a stunning verse? Last week, a number of us had the privilege of representing the new Anglican Network at a combined Anglican Network gathering in the United States in Pittsburgh.

One of the speakers was Baroness Cox. She is an English nurse who works tirelessly for those who are most forgotten, most at risk.

Told some amazing stories of flying in behind the war lines in the Sudan, giving supplies to those who were in danger of their lives.

She has worked to free slaves who have been captured. She is now the Deputy Speaker in the House of Lords in England and she continues to campaign for those who have no voice whatsoever.

[12 : 15] This is a story she told. A couple of weeks ago, she visited some of the Karen tribe who have crossed over from Thailand into Burma, to Myanmar, who are being hunted like animals.

They face unspeakable violence and deprivation from determined enemies. And in one enclave in the mountains, one enclave, she came across a group of Karen Christians who had heard she was coming.

And when she arrived, they gathered around and they handed her a little parcel wrapped in leaves. And they said to her, we have heard of the terrible hurricane, Katrina, in the United States of America.

And we know that our brothers and sisters in the United States are suffering. And so we have gathered together all the money that we could find. And she unwrapped the parcel and there were 700 or so Thai bahts, which when I came home I calculated is about \$17.50 of US currency.

And of course she hesitated to take the money, you know, knowing the disparity of wealth, but they begged her for the favour of contributing to the needs of their brothers and sisters.

[13 : 32] Isn't that a great story? They're world Christians. And I must say it's not a little discouraging when you look at the percentage of our budget that is spent on the poorest of the poor brothers and sisters in the global south.

I've visited churches in the United States that for every dollar they spend on themselves they give a dollar away to those in great need. That is something for us to pray about.

Verse 8. Chapter 9. God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.

As it's written he scatters abroad he gives to the poor his righteousness endures forever that's speaking about the person who gives to the poor he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply he will multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

Here is a principle. God takes anything we give to him and through him and multiplies it for a harvest of righteousness. Do you know why God has supplied you and me with enough?

[14 : 51] It is so that we might give generously and I think this is where the picture of sowing and reaping is so important for us. The smallest act of generosity in Christ's name can grow far beyond anything we could possibly imagine.

Every act of generosity can even reach out beyond our lifetime into eternity and we struggle constantly don't we with the temptation to think that we need to accumulate wealth for ourselves and if we're moral people will give a little bit that's left over for good causes so long as it doesn't inconvenience me and my family and my lifestyle and we store our money in our mattresses or our proverbial barns with the aim of enriching ourselves and when we do that we're not sowing into the kingdom of God we will not see God multiply our harvest but the first result the first result of generous giving is on those who receive the second result a little surprisingly is on ourselves look down at verse 11 you will be enriched really you will be enriched in every way for great generosity which through us will produce thanksgiving to God very interesting when we give it's not just one thing that happens there are two things that happen it gives God a chance to work in our hearts and our lives we are enriched please this is this is not a prosperity teaching it's not if you give a hundred dollars you're going to get ten thousand back

God is not the God of the prosperity gospel as though it's his job to make life comfortable and take away suffering and give us a life of luxury no no what's happening is this in the Old Testament you remember in Malachi God says bring in the full tithes into the storehouse put me to the test see if I will not open the window of heaven and cover you with blessing and when we dare to begin to give generously and we open our hand to God what he does is he places things in our hand he begins to take away our anxiety and our worry about money we find ourselves resting on him and on his grace but he cannot put blessings into a fist which is clenched it has to be opened and do you remember what happened when Jesus opened his hand and let go of his wealth for us it is because of him and because of his death that we can afford to be generous see God is greater than our needs and greater than our fears and he has the ability to take what we give and somehow make it overflow to us

I know this is a complete opposite of the message we get from advertising the ads say you owe it to yourself you earned it it's your money but God says actually it's my money the brains with which you made that money I gave you in the first place the fact that you were born where you were the fact that you were in the place that you are is my gift to you everything that you have is a result of my goodness and what that means is it gives me a completely different relationship with the things I own remember the old communion prayer when we bring the offertory to the front we say these words all things come of thee and of thine own have we given thee we don't give because God needs the money God will miss out if we somehow don't give him money remember in the Psalms God says I own every animal in the forest I own the cattle on a thousand hills if I was hungry

I wouldn't tell you about it because the whole world and all that is in it is mine but in verse 13 the apostle Paul says this under the test of this service under the proof of this service you will glorify God in your obedience it's an amazing word Paul is saying that the Corinthians will prove themselves genuine by the generous gift here is a concrete way of discovering whether or not we've experienced the grace of God or not being radically generous can only come from the grace of God if we need to be commanded and provoked we have not experienced God's grace that's what he's saying one of the essential marks of being gripped by God's grace is a spontaneous desire to be generous it's one of the few outward proofs that we have in the New Testament do you remember the apostle Peter describes a Christian as those to whom

[19 : 46] Jesus Christ is precious that's the basic definition of a Christian person that Jesus Christ is precious beyond all things to us worth more than my life itself everything I have is his and I prove I demonstrate that through generosity that in the end the issue is not really money in the end the issue is Christ if we're someone who gives it's about Christ if we're someone who doesn't give that is also about Christ because God loves a cheerful giver the first result is for those who receive the second result is for us and the third result even more surprisingly is on God himself down on verse 12 he speaks about the overflow in many thanksgiving to God under the test of this service you will glorify God by your obedience in acknowledging the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your contribution for them and for others one of the reasons that the Christian church grew so fast

I think in the early centuries was because of the radical generosity of the Christians remember when we looked through the book of Acts last year the early church community they lived ludicrously generously with each other and the non-Christians round about them just could not explain the extravagance of their generosity and held the church in awe and here is Paul writing to people in Corinth the old gods the old religions are failing all those religions cannot deal with the real needs that people had and when the gospel first came to a place it would create a new community a little community of believers and those churches fed the poor reached out to those who are hungry shared the good news of Christ and there was thanksgiving that returned to God the world was changed through Christian generosity do you know in the fourth century in Carthage Christians were persecuted famine and plague came upon the city and when the famine and plague hit the city the authorities abandoned the city

Cyprian who was the bishop of Carthage who was later martyred urged the Christians to stay he gathered them together in the centre of the city and he said stay care for those who are sick and dying irrespective of whether they have been your persecutors or not it was an enormously generous thing to do and it brought about thanksgiving and praise to God in 130 AD we have a document an anonymous document written to someone called Diognetus and he describes Christians in this way he says they dwell in their own countries but simply as sojourners as citizens they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners they marry as do all others they beget children but they do not destroy their offspring they have a common table but not a common bed they obey the prescribed laws at the same time surpass the laws by their lives they love they love all men they are persecuted by all they are unknown and condemned put to death and restored to life they are poor yet they make many rich they are in lack of all things yet they are bound in all they are dishonoured and yet in very dishonour they are glorified they do good but are punished as evil goods isn't that a wonderful description of Christians

I wonder if that's what people would say about us I need to conclude one of the most interesting parts of this conference last week in Pittsburgh was hearing Rick Warren Pastor Rick Warren who is the pastor of Saddleback Church which is in California it's a big church I think they have 16,000 people coming to their services each week Pastor Rick is the author of a number of books the most famous of which is The Purpose Driven Life it has become the biggest selling book in the world for the last two years and that has made a massive problem for Pastor Rick he has started receiving tens of millions of dollars so he and his wife sat down to pray together and to read God's word and they decided they made five decisions and this is their decisions the first one was they were not going to change their lifestyle didn't move house still drive the four-year-old forward the second thing is they stopped receiving a salary from the church the third thing they decided to do was they've worked for this church for 25 years they paid back all 25 years of income from the church and he said the day after he wrote the check an interviewer from the

New York Times came to interview him and they're always after the money they want to know about the money and the interviewer said how much money have you made from the church of Saddleback and he was able to say nothing actually which he enjoyed saying very much so that was the third decision the fourth decision was this they decided to reverse tithe they keep 10% they give away 90% and the fifth thing is they decided to create a foundation to help fight AIDS through local churches in Africa but that was impressive enough but there was a throwaway line that he had during the talk where he said that when he and his wife came to California 25 years before they were already giving 10% to the work of Christ starting in the first year of this new pastorate they decided to add 1% on top of that 10% every year so that I guess after 25 years they were already giving 35% of their income that's very impressive isn't it

[25 : 50] I think if you've been a Christian for more than a couple of years I want to encourage you to plan with regard to your giving if you don't have a plan you will perennially feel guilty and likely make poor decisions giving is not your philanthropy it's an opportunity to see God's purposes at work and to see God's blessing and the key again is not 10% which I think most of us here could afford without any difficulty whatsoever that's not the key the key is whether our hearts are willing to embrace ongoing sacrificial joyful generosity and some of us are just beginning to learn about that radical generosity and it does take time to move from here to there but you need to make concrete steps to move that direction and if you're a parent you should share it with your children how you earn how you spend how you give when people say to me

I cannot afford to give what they usually mean is I cannot afford to give without burdening myself but we cannot bear one another's burdens unless we burden ourselves and I'm very glad that Jesus did not adopt that attitude instead he left his father's throne of grace and he entered our world to be misunderstood to be persecuted and in the end to be executed in our place so that through his giving and through his poverty you and I might become rich unbelievably rich and by his grace he promises in these words to supply our needs to multiply what we are doing and what we give for a harvest of righteousness and he invites us to invest in his work to watch him multiply blessing to others to break the grip of materialism to see this stunning creative energy of generosity to learn how to rest on his unchanging love and to watch in the end as the thanksgiving and the glory go to him