

Cheerful Generosity

2 Corinthians 9:6–15
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Too many Christians have a wrong view of giving. What do I mean by this? Many look at giving as a loss: the money we give to a needy family or donate to a particular cause is less money for us to spend on ourselves. It leaves and doesn't come back.

Today's text challenges us to think differently. It confronts us with the perspective of God's sovereignty over the entire created universe. We often claim that we own a house or a car or a business, or that the money in our bank accounts and portfolios is ours. But this isn't true. It all belongs to the Lord. Scripture reminds us of this repeatedly. I believe it does this because we tend to forget it. Psalm 24:1 says, *The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.* The whole world belongs to God, and so does everything in it, including us. But maybe we think the Lord's interest is more general, i.e., that he's not really concerned about the finer details. If so, we should also consider Psalm 50:10 — *For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills.* Who owns the cattle that Farmer Smith and Farmer Jones and every other farmer take care of? Every single one of them belongs to God, who loans them to us to use, manage and enjoy. This is the Biblical principle of stewardship. The Lord placed us on earth to care for his property, not ours.

Even God's commandments reflect his ownership. Because our time belongs to the Lord, he commands us to work six days and rest one. He also owns our bodies and thus prohibits us from harming ourselves and others. Property is his to dispense at will; thus, we have no right to take what he puts in the care of others. Even our speech belongs to him. He defines what we may and may not say.

Verse 8 of our text stresses God's ownership. Every grace and gift is his. He makes us abound at his pleasure. He blesses the work of our hands when it's his will to do so.

Two Principles

This evening's text begins with two principles, one in verse 6 and another in verse 7, that we need to consider. Let's look at them.

The principle in verse 6 comes from common agricultural practices: *He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.* When a farmer goes out to plant his field, he has two choices. He can plant his seed sparingly, i.e., placing just a few seeds widely apart. Maybe he does this to save on the cost of seed, or maybe has some other reason. But what will he find when the harvest comes? A sparse crop! His miserly planting robbed him of God's blessing. But the farmer could also plant his seed bountifully, i.e., casting many seeds everywhere, knowing that a generous planting is far more likely to yield an abundant harvest. A farmer who does this will not be disappointed.

But verse 6 suggests even more. The word translated *bountifully* is actually the word commonly translated *blessing*. The same thing was true in the previous verse. So, we could translate the last half of verse 6 like this: "he which soweth with blessings shall reap also with blessings." This changes our focus a little. It's not just about generosity but also about the condition of our hearts. When we sow, are we sowing with the goal of conveying blessing to others? When we do, we find God's heart similarly manifested to us. He gives us a rich harvest that's circumscribed by countless blessings.

But generosity with the goal of blessing others isn't enough. For the rest, we have to consider Paul's second principle in verse 7. In this verse, he required us to be cheerful as well as generous. The Lord doesn't allow us to complain about helping others. Complaining is what stingy people do. After all, we have nothing that really belongs to us. As David said regarding the people's gifts to the Lord, *For all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee* (1 Chron. 29:14).

The idea of cheerfulness in giving comes from the Old Testament. It's about how we treat the poor. We must be cheerfully generous toward them. Deuteronomy 15:10–11 says, *Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him: because that for this thing the LORD thy God shall bless thee in all thy works, and in all that thou puttest thine hand unto. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.* Cheerful giving is how we show compassion.

We have to understand this in relation to the Jewish calendar. Every seventh year in the Jewish economy was a year of release in which debts were canceled. Now, suppose a poor man needed a loan in the sixth year. Should his Jewish brother give it to him, knowing that he may be taking advantage of the system and might never pay it again? He might very well be right, but he couldn't assume it. So, the law required him to make the loan. Moses wrote, *Beware that there be not a thought in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou givest him nought; and he cry unto the LORD against thee, and it*

be sin unto thee (Deut. 15:9). This is where the cheerfulness comes in. He couldn't even complain that God required him to do this. His heart was not to be grieved; rather, he was to open his hand wide to his brother in need.

We learned two things from this. One is that in our own minds we should regard loans made to needy brothers as gifts. If we get our money back, great! If not, we have to let it go and forgive it. We should never make a loan but we're not willing to lose. This teaches us a little something about forgiveness in general, doesn't it? And second, although the Old Testament practice was to cancel debts every seven years, the New Testament encourages daily cheerful giving. Generosity should be an everyday reality in our lives. It should be a way of life.

But is this how we live? Do we practice generosity coupled with a desire to bless and done in the spirit of cheerfulness? When we write our checks to the church or send money by Venmo, do we consider all the good it does — locally, in the Western Classis and in the Synod — and say to ourselves, “Wow, I get to be a part of all this and am, therefore, far more blessed than those who receive my gifts”? We should. Jesus said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive* (Acts 20:35). And our text says, *God loveth a cheerful giver*.

The Effects of Cheerful Generosity

The rest of today's text identifies the effects of cheerful generosity. When we give the way the Lord wants us to give, what can we expect?

This is an area where countless souls have been misled in recent years. The Prosperity Gospel teaches that God always wills financial and physical blessing for his people. So, if we believe the right things and donate to the right causes, our wealth will only increase. The Word of Faith movement encourages us to name it and claim it, i.e., just tell God what you want and, as long as it's within the scope of his promises, he'll give it to you, like a good heavenly concierge.

As I look at today's text, it's almost like Paul wrote it just to expose this kind of foolishness. The effects of cheerful giving may be financial, but they're not primarily financial. In fact, Paul had very little to say about finances in the following verses. He was much more concerned about the long-term effects of generosity.

The first effect of our generosity is in verse 8, which says, *And God is able to make all grace [not just wealth] abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work*. God causes all grace or gifts to abound to his people so that we'll always have what we need — spiritually, physically and financially — but not necessarily what we want. He doesn't promise an overabundance. And what did Paul highlight? Not money, but good works. Note the end

of verse 8. More than anything else, our generosity shows that God the Holy Spirit is working his sanctifying grace in our hearts, making us more like our Savior. And verse 9 says that this practical righteousness lasts forever. Paul quoted Psalm 112:9, a description of a righteous man, and Isaiah 55:10, which promises God's blessing.

Another effect of Christian generosity is thankfulness. Verses 11 and 12 say, *Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God.* Isn't it interesting that the most thankful people are not those who hoard God's gifts and use them only to satisfy their own pleasure, but those who give them away? A man who hoards things can't be thankful because he never has enough, but a generous man will always be thankful because he looks to the Lord to supply his every need. This means that real gratitude is the result of faith and trust, not works. It's about looking to Jesus, who gives us everything we need to live before him in gratitude.

But gratitude doesn't stop there. It must also be catchy. Verse 12 says it abounds by *many thanksgivings unto God.* As we give, our generosity produces increased thankfulness in us, but it also increases the thankfulness of those to whom we give. Cheerful giving helps our brothers and sisters in Christ appreciate even more the generosity of our God, who satisfies the needs of all his people. He makes all things work together for our good. And we get to be a part of it.

Closely connected with thanksgiving is the third effect of our generosity: it glorifies God. Verse 13 speaks of this: *Whiles by the experiment [or proven character] of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men.* We glorify God when what we do to help our brothers and sisters in Christ harmonizes with the words that come out of our mouths, showing that God's grace is real and has changed our lives. We say we believe in Jesus and our lives show it in how we treat one another. John wrote, *If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also* (1 John 4:20–21).

And finally, the fourth effect of our generosity is prayer. Verse 14 says, *And by their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you.* When we're generous, others are more likely to pray for us, even though they may not know the extent of our giving. They can tell just by the way we treat other people that our hearts overflow with generosity. The amount of our giving is secondary. The widow who put her might into the temple treasury gave more than everyone else (Mark 12:43–44). Why? Because she gave from her heart. She gave everything she had.

Paul wrote all of this to encourage the Corinthians to be more like the Macedonians. Do you remember how he described the Macedonians' generosity in the previous chapter? He said that they gave out of *the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty* (v. 2).

The last verse of today's text is, in a very important sense, the most important. After writing at length to encourage the Corinthians to be more generous, he could hardly contain himself. He broke out in thunderous praise to God: *Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift*.

So far as I can tell, this is the first time the word translated *unspeakable* ever appeared in the Greek language. Clement used it fifty years later, and Justin Martyr used it in the second century, but Paul seems to have coined it. He was so excited about God's gift that no previously existing word could express his praise. He had to create a new one.

And what was this gift that aroused such praise in the apostle? It was Jesus. In the previous chapter, he wrote, *For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich* (v. 9). Paul delighted in God's grace in Christ, calling men out of their sins to a truly wonderful and generous Savior. Jesus gave everything for sinners. He was, therefore, the greatest of all gifts!

But why did Paul add this here, i.e., after a long discussion of Christian giving? Was it not because all giving begins and ends with Jesus? It begins with him because his grace makes us generous. It ends with him because he receives all the praise, thanksgiving and glory when we manifest cheerful generosity toward others.

So, with the apostle, let's give all thanks to God for the greatest gift of all — his Son — and say, *Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift*. Amen.