

Revealing Christ in a Recession

2 Corinthians 8:1-7, 9:8-15

Mark Vroegop

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. 6 Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you — see that you excel in this act of grace also (2 Cor 8:1-7).

6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. 12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. 13 By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. 15 Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift! (2 Cor 9:8-15)

The Sunday after Easter we will begin our new study through the book of Matthew, but for the next three weeks I'd like to speak to you about two subjects that represent some unique challenges and opportunities for us as a ministry.

The first subject is how to think biblically in the midst of a recession. And the second is about our Elder's strategy for growth. Our attendance is up about 25% from a year ago, ministries are expanding, and we need to think, talk, and pray about where we are going as a ministry.

At the beginning of the year, I told you that a main priority for our Elders in 2009 was working on our growth strategy. On March 22 and 29 I am going to bring a two part message called "Growth, Governance, and the Glory of God." Our plan is to present you with a philosophy and a strategy, and to help you understand what we are thinking. We will take two Sundays to talk

about this, and then we will have a congregational meeting on March 29 where we will seek your approval on a list of staff members who will be designated as pastors. The only proposal on the table is a clearer definition of who are defined as pastors at College Park and their job titles everything else that we share is just an effort to keep you updated with what we are thinking.

Please know that there is no other agenda here. Our church is doing very well financially. We will not be rolling out building drawings or a capital campaign. What we merely want to do is help you understand that we have two unique opportunities in front of us that require careful and prayerful thought: a recession and 25% more people.

The title for my sermon today is "Revealing Christ in a Recession," and my aim is to help us think biblically about the difficult days that we are in. I want you to see the unique opportunity that is right in front of us. I want you to understand that a recession shows us what we really value, and it presents a wonderful moment to display the worth of Christ.

How do we do that? I think we do so through two words: **joy and generosity**. I see this clearly in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 - "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 for in a severe test of affliction, their **abundance of joy** and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a **wealth of generosity** on their part."

Paul is writing to the church at Corinth encouraging them to give to an offering that he is taking for the believers in Jerusalem who are suffering financially. To motivate the Corinthians to give, he uses the generosity of the Macedonians as a example of how to respond in the midst of financial hardship. And the two chief characteristics that he highlights are joy and generosity.

Do you see what is unique about joy and generosity in the midst of financial difficulties? It is the exact opposite of how most people respond. Fear and hoarding is the normal response. Remember Y2K? Joy and generosity reveal Christ in stunning ways in a recession.

Seven Ways Joyful Generosity Can Reveal Christ in a Recession

Seasons of testing have a purifying effect; they cause us to take a careful look at ourselves and what we really value. I read an article two weeks ago in the Indy Star about the how the bad economy has led to an increase in volunteerism.

Michael Brown, chief executive and co-founder of the non-profit City Year in Boston, said it's not just the sour economy that's contributed to the jump in volunteerism. His organization, which places young adults as tutors and mentors, has seen applications jump about three-fold in the past year. "There's something in a declining economy that

clarifies all our values," Brown said. "Young folks are saying, 'I'm needed more than ever because I'm needed in this economy. Now is the time I should go do this.'"

That is what a recession does: it clarifies our values. It brings us back to our foundation, and what our trust is in. It shows us that we take too much joy in money, and it reminds us what is really important.

So what does joyful generosity reveal?

1. It reveals the beauty of God's grace. Verse 1 tells us that God had given the Macedonian's grace to be joyful and generous. God had given them grace and their hearts were filled with joy. Their joy was clearly something that was not from them. In other words those who knew the Macedonians knew that what was going on inside of them was not normal!

Here's a question for you: How do you get grace? James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 both tell us the same thing – "God resists (opposes) the proud, but he gives grace to the humble." Somehow in the midst of their affliction they had embraced humility, God gave them grace, and they were happy! That's how God works.

And that is also why I so alarmed when I heard Bobby Jindal, the governor of Louisiana, say the following:

"As I -- as a child, I remember going to the grocery store with my dad. Growing up in India, he had seen extreme poverty. As we walked through the aisles {in an American grocery store}, looking at the endless variety on the shelves, he would tell me, "Bobby, Americans can do anything." I still believe that to this day: Americans can do anything. When we pull together, there's no challenge we can't overcome."

And I wondered in my heart what God must think about the kind of hubris that says "we can do anything." I wondered about what it would be like to have someone say, "This economic downturn has shown a bright light on our greed, covetousness, and materialism. It has reminded us about the fragility of economic systems, the frailty of human effort, and the false hope of financial security. This economic downturn is a time for us to hear again the words of God in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 –

"When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, 14 if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

A recession is a time for us to joyfully declare, "We need God's grace!" A recession reminds us that real joy comes from receiving God's grace.

2. It reveals commitment to the Lordship of Christ. Verse 5 says, “but they gave themselves **first to the Lord** and then by the will of God to us.” So their joyful generosity was not the foundation, it was the fruit. The foundation was their commitment to supremacy of Jesus, and it expressed itself in joyful generosity.

Now doesn't that remind you about another passage?

31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt 6:31-33).

A recession provides a unique opportunity to put into practice our commitment to seek first the kingdom of God. A recession allows the differences between those who love the Lordship of Christ and those who love material possessions to be seen more clearly. It calls believers in Jesus to not fear, but to put their trust in God, knowing that he knows what we need. A recession reminds us that God is in control.

3. It reveals a God-centered eagerness to be involved. It is amazing to hear the following statement from Paul about these impoverished people – “3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—(2 Cor 8:3-4).

Their joy was translated into an eagerness to be involved in the lives of hurting people. And keep in mind that they were in need themselves. Paul says that “their extreme poverty...overflowed into a wealth of generosity” (8:3). They saw the need in the lives of others as something that they couldn't wait to be involved in. Their joy in God drove them to want to be involved in meeting the needs of others.

This is how the biblical church has operated – joyful generosity.

44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47).

However, that is not how we are naturally wired, and that is why a recession provides such a unique opportunity. Therefore, I want to call you to put aside fear and self-focus and see the opportunities in front of us to reveal Christ in fresh and new ways.

Here's a few practical suggestions:

- Develop a list of people who you know who are looking for work, pray for them, ask them how they are doing. Get into their lives. Invite them this afternoon to our Fresh Encounter Service where we will be specifically praying about the needs in people's lives.
- Work on your family budget to free up some additional funds so that you can meet the needs of others. Ask the Lord to put someone on your heart and then do something about it.
- Once a month we take a benevolence offering which the church uses to meet financial needs within the church. Make this fund a thoughtful, priority in your giving.
- This Monday we are starting a small group called JumpStart for men who are currently unemployed. It will meet from 7:00 – 8:00 AM, and the goal is to get some men together for prayer, encouragement, networking, and accountability. Maybe you could find a friend and say, "Let's go together – tomorrow."

The point here is that God wants to use us to be a part of the solution in people's lives. That happens at many levels. But we need to fight through the tendency to only think about ourselves.

When you came into the auditorium today some of you received a handful of M&M's. Some of you did not. Let me ask you a few questions:

- How many of you shared your M&M's with someone else?
- How many of you just ate them?
- Do you know that we distributed enough M&M's for the everyone to have some?

Our problem is that we don't think about resources that way, do we? No, instead we have a mentality that just simply doesn't see our resources as the means by which God is going to meet the needs of others.

A recession could reveal a God-centered eagerness to be involved.

Now what would motivate people to think like this and live like this? What does a recession reveal about motivation? Chapter nine answers that question.

4. It reveals the value of a harvest of righteousness. "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver... 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity..." (2 Cor 9:6-7; 10-11).

Followers of Jesus know that joyful generosity is not a waste. They are not giving money away; they are investing it into a much greater harvest of righteousness. They see the value of the harvest of righteousness, and that is why they give.

A recession reveals if we really value righteousness.

5. It reveals trust in God's sufficient grace. The next verse is one of the most important verses in the Bible. It is a verse designed for seasons of recession. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work (2 Cor 9:8).

Do you see the principle? It is so important. It addresses the knee-jerk reaction we have to giving which goes like this: If I give this away it will create a need for me. The answer to that is a faith-filled belief in three promises: 1) God possesses all grace, 2) He can give me what I need in all things and at all times, and 3) I will never lack what I need.

The beautiful thing about a recession is that it kicks out the self-sufficient legs from underneath us and calls us to trust in God's grace.

6. It reveals thanksgiving in others and the glorification of God. Giving is spiritual money laundering. It takes United States currency, and it launders it into thanksgiving and the glorification of God. Think of that! Your money creates gratitude and glory to God.

12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. 13 By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you (2 Cor 9:12-14).

A recession reveals that God's people love gratitude and glory to God so much that they are willing to be joyfully generous.

7. It reveals Christ as the ultimate gift. A recession is helpful in that it shows us and the world what is really valuable. And that is why Paul concludes two chapters on joyful generosity with a clear focus on Christ. Here is what he says, "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (9:15). He comes full circle and ends with a crescendo. The poverty of the Macedonians and their generosity has reminded him once again that Jesus became poor and gave the ultimate joyful and generous gift: his own life. It is expressible!

The joyful generosity of Jesus is completely overwhelming. And Paul's point here is so clear: people who know Christ this way are compelled to be like him.

A recession only makes their joyful generosity stand out more clearly.

It is almost as if Paul could imagine someone seeing followers of Jesus so filled with joy and generosity that was so different from the culture that he or she would ask, "What is different about you? Why are you not panicking? Why are you so filled with joy? Why are you so concerned about others? Why are more inclined to give now while others are not?"

And the answer is: Jesus!

We reveal Christ in a recession by joyful, Jesus-centered, generosity.

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