

First to the Lord

Planning for Joy

2 Corinthians 8:16-9:7

Mark Vroegop

16 But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. 17 For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. 18 With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. 19 And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. 20 We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, 21 for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. 22 And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. 23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. 24 So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

9 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, 2 for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. 3 But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove vain in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. 4 Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. 5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

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 (2 Cor 8:16-9:7).

2 Corinthians 8-9 was written to motivate the church at Corinth to give to an offering that the apostle Paul was taking for some hurting believers in the Jerusalem church. However, the point of these two chapters was not money. I'm sure that there were some believers who said, "Paul, you are just writing this so that we'll give to this offering." That would entirely miss the much bigger point.

Paul uses the occasion of this offering to talk about the importance of generosity. The end game was not just the offering. The spiritual endgame and the reason that Paul spends forty-nine verses and 15% of his entire letter on this subject is because Paul knew that there were

many spiritual lessons to be learned. He didn't want them to miss the spiritual value and the joy of generosity.

That is why we are talking about this subject. Our church is approaching the most significant opportunity for giving in our history, and I want to be sure that we don't miss an important spiritual growth moment. I want you give sacrificially to our Mission Expansion Project in the same way that people before us did so to provide for the facility that we are worshipping in today. But my greater goal is to see a renewal of generosity in all of us. I have much a much bigger agenda than just a new facility for College Park Church; I want to see the Lordship of Christ on display in new ways through giving whether it is to a building project or any worthy cause. In fact I heard this week about someone who donated their car to the Brookside Initiative because of what we are studying right now. That is awesome!

I really believe that what we do with our money is a important issue. There are eternal issues on the line. Listen to what Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:17-19 –

17 As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

How we handle our money has everything to do with the condition of our hearts. That is why this is worth talking about.

What we've learned so far:

I'm going to give you 20 principles from 2 Corinthians 8-9, and so far we've looked at nine of them:

1. Generosity is motivated through personal example (8:1)
2. Generosity is rooted in the grace of God (8:1)
3. Generosity is linked to the Lordship of Christ (8:5)
4. Generosity is part of spiritual maturity (8:7)
5. Generosity is a proof of the genuineness of love (8:8)
6. Generosity is a reminder about the gospel (8:9)
7. Generosity is rewarded (8:10)
8. Generosity is to come from what you have (8:12)
9. Generosity is part of God's plan for provision (8:14)

Our text this morning has a long section connected to the administration of the gift (8:16-9:5), and then has two short but loaded verses. From these verses, I want to give you four additional principles the help our understanding of giving.

10. Generosity is worth hard work (8:24)

This principle is taken from a fairly large passage (8:16-9:5), and it is interesting to note how much time Paul spends talking about the administration of the offering. Apparently Paul believed that a particular level of effort and detail was needed. He lists numerous details:

- He is sending Titus who shares the same pastoral concern for the church that Paul has (8:16-17), a larger burden than just the money that will be collected.
- Paul makes reference to another man who is famous for his preaching the gospel, and he indicates that this man will travel with him to deliver the gift (8:18-19).
- He tells them that his motivation is directly related to a desire to remain free from blame or appearance of evil (8:20-21). Paul frequently had to fend off attacks regarding financial matters, especially from the Corinthian Church (see 1 Corinthians 9:3-18).
- A third person will also be a part of the traveling party. A man who is described as “a brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters” (8:22).

Paul was willing to think through, plan, and be very detailed with all of the dynamics connected to the taking of this offering. It involved multiple people, and it was a lot of work. So was Paul doing all of this because of the money? Was that his end-game? No way.

There was so much more on the line here than money. The gift was just a platform which communicated much more than just about money.

3 But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove vain in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. 4 Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident (2 Cor 9:3-4).

But it was also worth the hard work because often a rushed gift or an unplanned gift is not a willing gift.

5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction (2 Cor 9:3-5).

Paul knew that giving in the right way takes some hard work. It requires thought, planning, and preparation otherwise it will be less than what God intends.

This is why giving can sometimes touch a nerve. Giving runs contrary to our nature as human beings, and all that you have to do to **not** give is just not think about giving. Just run your

finances on auto-pilot with no governor, and you'll never give. Even more likely, you'll be in a position where it seems impossible to give. Giving takes discipline.

It also takes creativity. You see there are lots of ways to give, and the ways to give changes with each phase of life. Wrestling through all the issues connected to that is hard work. There is a lot to think about, a lot to pray over, and a lot to evaluate. This runs counter-intuitive to our culture. It is far too easy to waste our money and, for that matter, our lives.

Years ago I read this something in John Piper's book *Don't Waste Your Life* that illustrates this well:

I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 1998 edition of Reader's Digest, which tells about a couple who took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball and collect shells. At first, when I read it I thought it might be joke. A spoof on the American dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life – your one and only precious, God-given life – and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator, be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: "Look, Lord. See my shells." *That* is a tragedy. And people are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that dream. Over against that, I put my protest: Don't buy it. Don't waste your life.¹

Giving is worth the counter-cultural hard work because, at the end of the day, giving is not just about money; it is about the investment of your life.

11. Generosity is based upon a promise (9:6)

Verse six introduces us another giving principle that is connected to a divine promise or a divine law. The Bible tells us that there are certain ways that God works in the universe in response to our actions. For example:

- "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" – James 4:6. Proud people are resisted by God.
- "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap" Gal 6:7. When it comes to your actions, you reap what you sow. If you break your marital vows with 14 women, it doesn't matter how far you can hit a little white ball, life is going to be very hard.

¹ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003), 46.

Those are negative divine laws. Paul wants us to see a positive one as it relates to generosity. He uses a farming metaphor to connect us to what happens when we give.

6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully (2 Cor 9:6).

The principle should be fairly obvious: if you plant a lot, you reap a lot.

Now I'm not a farmer. I used to have a small vegetable garden in our first home. The main thing that I try to grow now is grass – lush, green, enviable turf. So I don't know a lot about gardening, but I do know one thing: you can't grow what you don't plant. If you want more grass to grow, it is not enough to just water the existing grass. You have to plant seeds if there is to be any hope of future growth. Reaping only comes from those who plant.

If I plant four tulip bulbs, I can hope to see four tulip plants. It would be ridiculous for me to think that I will get tulips if I don't plant any. Planting four bulbs doesn't guarantee four plants. But planting none guarantees no growth. In other words, there is a direct connection between reaping and planting. The size of the harvest is always connected to the amount of seed that is sown.

So there is an important promise or divine law that is in play when it comes to our giving. Giving is like sowing; it results in a harvest. But you might ask what kind of harvest are we talking about? What kind of blessing? There are many. We'll look at this more fully in the next two weeks, but I just want you to see the clear statement in 9:10-11.

“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. You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity” (2 Cor 9:10-11).

The promise here is that giving yields a harvest of great blessing, often it money but it is far beyond just money.

(Schwind Family Testimony)

12. Generosity is to be done in freedom (9:7)

The next two principles are really important because they get to heart of what New Testament giving is supposed to be all about. The first part of verse seven tells us that real giving must be done in freedom.

Paul gives three characteristics that mark genuine generosity:

- 1. Giving is something that each person must work through personally.** "Each one must give as he has made up his own mind." The focal point here is clearly on the importance of individual wrestling; the phrase "made up" means to take counsel with oneself. No one can tell you what generosity looks like. Every person's situation and ability is different, yet every believer is indwelt by the Spirit of God. True generosity is really between you and the Lord.
- 2. Giving should not be done reluctantly.** The word reluctantly literally means "out of grief or out of sorrow," and the word is often used for the emotion of what you feel when you are suffering (1 Peter 2:19). True giving doesn't happen when you give grudgingly.
- 3. Giving should not be forced.** To give under compulsion means that the giving is forced, required, or even under duress. The verb form of the word is used in Acts 26:11 where Paul describes his pre-conversion role as a persecutor when he "punished {Christians} often...and tried to make them blaspheme." Forcing someone to give takes away the one thing that makes generosity beautiful: freedom.

Freedom is critical to giving because without freedom giving is not an expression of love, a statement of allegiance, or an act of worship. Forced giving is what you do on April 15th every year. It is what a small business owner "gives" to a gang for "protection." Without freedom, biblical generosity breaks down. Guilt and fear destroy true giving.

Now some might think that this means that you should feel no obligation at all to give, as if freedom means the freedom to give nothing. I don't think that is what Paul had in mind here. The Bible always assumes that God's children will be generous, and Paul was expecting this church to give. But his expectation was based upon the assumption that they would do it for the right reason. The object and the reason needed to be right. God needed to be their ultimate object and worship needed to be the ultimate reason for giving. Freedom is central to that.

So I don't think that Paul is saying that we are free **not** to give. Generosity is assumed. But where you give and what you give is something that you must work through in your own heart. No one can tell you what to give. It is a matter of personal worship.

Generosity is challenging because it causes us to live for the audience of one – namely, Jesus. It calls us to ask: What does he want me to give? What fits with my love for him? What is an appropriate expression of love? What does sacrifice look like? These are not easy questions, and that is really the beauty of what giving does in us: it makes worship personal. Freedom is critical for that happen.

13. Generosity is worthless without joy (9:7)

The final principle in verse seven is connected to joy. After telling us that giving must be done in freedom, Paul gives us the reason why: God loves a cheerful giver. Paul is quoting loosely from Proverbs 22:9 which says "Whoever has a bountiful eye will be blessed, for he shares his bread with the poor." There is something about joy that makes generosity meaningful and something about its absence that makes giving worthless.

The word for "cheerful" in 9:7 is the Greek word *hilaros* from which you can hear the English word *hilarious*. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the translators use *hilaros* to translate a Hebrew word that means "to cause to shine" (Psalm 104:15). Cheerfulness brings emotional sunshine.

Joy and cheerfulness are so connected to generosity that Romans 12:8 actually translates the Greek word *hilaros* as generosity. Giving is so connected to joy that without joy there is no real giving.

But when joy becomes central to the generosity, it actually increases our joy. Giving joyfully results in more joy. Christmas and birthdays are so much more fun when you have kids. There is joy in finding the right gift, joy in watching them open the gift, and joy in their response. Giving causes joy to shine in a whole new way.

Paul didn't want the church at Corinth to miss the opportunity for joy. He was laboring for their joy, and that was why he was talking about giving. He didn't want them to miss the opportunity for joy at whole new level.

While in Holland the church built a large and much-needed addition. For a number of reasons we decided to do the project completely debt-free. We collected commitments and for almost 2 years collected money, looking for a particular dollar amount that would be the trigger point to start. Well in the meantime, the cost of steel sky-rocketed. And we were faced with the unfortunate reality of having to go back to our people and ask them for more money after they had already given for 2 years. We needed an additional \$180,000 by a particular date, or the entire project was in jeopardy.

A few Sundays before the deadline, a man asked to meet with me. I had no idea why he wanted to meet. In the course of our time together we talked about where we were at as a church and our financial need, and he told me that he was convinced that we needed this new facility. He said, "We're not going to miss this target." I said, "I sure hope not." And to that he replied, "No, I'm telling you. You are not going to miss the target. If you are short, let's talk. We need this building." It was an amazing moment! Everything we'd be working for over the last three years was going to happen! We were going to hit our goal, but I was the only one who knew.

The following two Sundays I challenged our people with a new level of zeal. I knew we were going to hit our funding goal, so why would I continue to encourage them to give? Because I knew that joy was right around the corner, and I didn't want any of them to miss out. God had already shown up. God was going to provide, and I wanted all of them to experience the joy.

I called our church to give, not because we needed the money but because joy was on the horizon.

That was a defining moment in my life when it comes to the power of giving and its connection to joy.

I've learned that when I plan to give I'm actually planning for joy!

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