

First to the Lord

Christian Alchemy: Converting Human Currency into Spiritual Blessings
2 Corinthians 9:9-15

Mark Vroegop

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!

Six weeks ago I shared with you our vision for the Mission Expansion Project with the hope that we could pray what King David did in 1 Chronicles 29 at the offering for the temple:

16 O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. 17 I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. 18 O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you (1 Chron 29:16-18).

My aim has been to help us savor the importance of this moment in the life of our church, understanding that every Sunday we worship in a facility provided for us by those who gave in the past and realize that what we do today will impact future generations of people who will worship at 96th and Towne. I have also tried to help you understand that importance of this moment for each of us personally. Sacrificial giving tests us, and it offers an important spiritual opportunity to practically trust the Lord and to see Him be true to His Word.

My goal has not just been to successfully meet our finding goal. That certainly is one goal, but my ultimate goal has been for you to discover the joy of giving – to see that it is "better to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). And I've seen it taking place in our church in some wonderful ways.

20 Principles from 2 Corinthians 8-9

We've already taken four Sundays to look at Paul's teaching on giving from 2 Corinthians 8-9. Paul was encouraging that church to give to an offering for the benevolence needs of the church in Jerusalem. He uses the opportunity of an offering to talk about the importance of generosity. And from these two chapters we've already covered 14 principles:

- 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)**
- 10. Generosity is worth hard work (8:24)**
- 11. Generosity is based upon a promise (9:6)**
- 12. Generosity is to be done in freedom (9:7)**
- 13. Generosity is worthless without joy (9:7)¹**
- 14. Generosity is living on future grace (9:8)**

Six Remaining Principles

Now there are six principles that we have yet to examine. The focus of these remaining principles is on the effect of generosity or on what giving does.

15. Generosity is a spiritual catalyst (9:9-11)

Right after making the point about all sufficient grace in verse 8, Paul cites Psalm 112 as support for what he has just said. If you were to look up this Psalm you would find that it is loaded with great truths about trusting the Lord, and the reason why Paul mentions it here is because he sees that trusting God, giving, and righteousness are all linked together. In other

¹ In my message on February 21, 2010, I made reference to the fact that generosity and joy are linked. To illustrate this I cited Romans 12:8. However, I incorrectly stated that the word translated "generosity" in the ESV is the Greek word for joy. I translated the last part of the verse "the one who is merciful, with cheerfulness" and associated it with the ESV translation for "one who contributes, in generosity," thereby assuming that they had translated generosity as cheerfulness. An observant church member kindly brought to my attention that generosity and cheerfulness are two distinct Greek words in the text. I went back and reviewed my notes, and she was correct. However, even though my illustration using Romans 12:8 was faulty, the over-arching point – that giving is worthless without joy – is still true. In fact, Romans 12:8 reinforces that point by linking cheerfulness to acts of mercy. I'm so grateful that I serve a congregation who searches the Scriptures for themselves!

words giving is a vital part of what it means to be righteous. It is one of the most spiritual things that a follower of Jesus does.

Something amazing happens when we give. It becomes a spiritual catalyst. We take man-made human currency that represents value and worth, and we convert it into spiritual blessings. Alchemy was a form of chemistry and philosophy in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that tried to take certain metals and make gold out of it. Dictionary.com defines it "the process of transmuting a common substance, usually of little value, into a substance of great value."²

That is what happens from a spiritual standpoint: we give something away that has limited value and it is transformed into something of great value. In a moment we'll see what it does for other people, but first I want you to see what giving does for the giver. Notice what is created:

- **More capacity** – There is a promise here in verse 10 that God "will multiply your seed for sowing." Paul is quoting here from Isaiah 55:10, and what follows in that passage is pregnant with potential: "so shall my word be that goes from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Giving often creates even more capacity for future ministry.
- **More righteousness** – Paul also quotes from Hosea 10:12 – "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up the fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord that he may come and rain righteousness upon you." Paul saw giving as a catalyst that could cause more people to seek the Lord.
- **More generosity** – Giving causes us to be more generous in other ways. Verse 11 says "you will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way." What happens is that we discover how fun and fulfilling generosity can be, and then generosity begins to show up in other non-financial areas. Why does this happen? Because at the heart of generosity is the spiritual value of learning to trust the Lord, and when you learn to do it with money you begin to do it in other areas too. You are more generous with your time, your reputation, your space, and your stuff. You learn that God can be trusted and you become even more generous.

Giving does something for the giver. It becomes a spiritual catalyst for so much more than what we even see at first. In an amazing way, man-made currency becomes a conduit for a beautiful flow of spiritual blessings. Giving creates more capacity for ministry, more righteousness, and more generosity.

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/alchemy>

16. Generosity is a means of creating gratitude to God (9:12)

The remaining principles relate to what giving does for others. Man-made, human currency is transformed into gratitude or thanksgiving to God. How does that happen?

To start, let me take you back to what we learned in 8:14. We discovered that God's delivery system for taking care of people in need is to provide abundance for others and then motivating them to give. In this way we become giving conduits through which God works. God is going to provide for people in need, and he can do it in many different ways. But one of the primary ways that he provides is through the generosity of others.

Now Paul envisions what will happen in the heart of the person receiving the gift. They have significant needs, and they've poured out their hearts to the Lord for provision. When their needs are met through the generosity of others, they are not just going to be thankful to the people who gave. They will be thankful to God. He or she cannot help but say, "Thank you, God! You heard my cry. You met my needs." The connection is an easy one to make.

So while earthly people are involved and earthly resources are used, the person who receives the gift knows that it is really from God. Through giving we pour out into the lives of others and a beautiful overflow of gratitude to God happens! Giving goes in; gratitude comes out.

Just imagine with me the amount of need that emanates from our city each and every day. Imagine the millions of various needs – empty cupboards, delinquent bills, and foreclosures. Imagine all the broken marriages, runaway kids, abuse, violence, and injustice that God sees and hears about every day. And when you or I are a part of meeting the needs of people we are conduits of God's work and gratitude to Him. We change what flows to heaven. We are a part of changing what people say to God – from "God, help me!" to "God, you helped me!" We play a part in creating gratitude to God.

This also relates very specifically to our proposed facility expansion. For many of us this very room is sacred ground, not that the building is holy, but this is where the Spirit of God met us. In this room is where God brought conviction, opened your eyes to your need, or where you've been able to worship him. Those who gave to make this facility possible have been a part of creating gratitude to God. In the same way giving the Mission Expansion Project is not just about more space. It is about more gratitude that will flow upward to God for years to come.

17. Generosity is an opportunity for God to be glorified (9:13)

Verse 13 highlights what is closely connected to gratitude: the glorification of God. Paul explains what often happens as the receiver considers the process of provision. It works like this: a need surfaces, a gift is received, God is thanked, and giver is appreciated. It sounds like this, "Honey, look what just came in the mail. That was so kind of them. God is awesome!"

The gift creates gratitude but it creates something even more. Gratitude is expressing thanksgiving to God for his provision; glorification is worshipping God for who he is. Gratitude turns your gaze upon God; glorification is the awe and wonder of discovering who God really is. Paul says, "By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel."

Giving creates the glorification of God. Some of you may be familiar with the Westminster Shorter Confession. The first question and answer is: What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Romans 11:36 says, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." In other words, everything exists in this world for one purpose, for one ultimate good, for one supremely and eternal value: the glory of God.

And when your generosity is received by someone who then glorifies God, you have been a part of a very important spiritual process. Think of it. You have taken human money and by your giving created the glorification of God. If you are a follower of Jesus you know that there is no greater goal, no more valuable thing in the world to live for, and nothing more worthy than the glory of God. Giving is a conduit for God to receive glory.

18. Generosity is a motivator for prayer (9:14)

There's even more. Generosity not only creates gratitude and glorification; it creates prayer. Paul indicates that the gift from the Corinthians will make a significant relational deposit in the hearts of the Jerusalem saints.

This is an important point to note here because behind the scenes of this offering is a racial issue between a predominately Gentile Church in Corinth and a predominately Jewish Church in Jerusalem. The generosity expressed by the Corinthian Church would communicate a great deal of love, and it will serve to motivate the Jerusalem Church to pray for the saints in Corinth.

Now Paul is not suggesting that the Corinthians give **so that** the church will pray for them. But he is attempting to show the many and varied fruits that come out of this gift. Think of it: man-made, human currency creates prayer! That is amazing.

19. Generosity is life change on display (9:14)

Giving creates gratitude, the glorification of God, and prayer. In verse 14, Paul gives a summary statement of what people see in followers of Jesus through giving: "the surpassing grace of God upon you."

Giving demonstrates the work of God in your heart. We all know that we are naturally sinful and selfish. Therefore when true generosity happens, it gives tangible evidence of God's ability to produce good things out of sinful people.

This is one of the reasons that I don't like to receive anonymous gifts. I understand why some people feel it is better to give anonymously, but internally it is frustrating to me. It is hard for me to glorify God through the life of an anonymous person. Maybe that is just my issue and I know that giving can get really weird when you are too concerned that people know. But I also think that there is something really meaningful about the personal connection to the gift.

I heard a story this week about a woman who years ago heard the "Boat People" from Laos at the end of the Vietnam War. Her heart was moved and she determined to do something. She invited three teenagers from Laos into their home even though she didn't Laotian and none of them spoke English. She put Laotian words on cards on various things in the house so they would know where to find things. After a few months, the Laotians were established enough to move out on their own. Eventually, they relocated to the Washington State to start a new life. Every year, without fail, they would send her a card on Mother's day. Years later the woman died, and the girls heard about her passing. And out of love and honor for her generosity, the oldest Laotian girl attended her funeral to pay their respects.

That's an amazing story, isn't it? But what makes it even more amazing is that the woman that I talked about is Dottie Takayoshi, a church member whose funeral was this week. She was a conduit of generosity, leading to gratitude, resulting in the glorification of God.

20. Generosity is a celebration of the gospel (9:15)

The finale to these incredible chapters is a celebration of the beauty of the gospel. Paul ends with a crescendo statement: "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" The apostle Paul is so overcome with the power of what he is talking about that he is at a loss for words. In fact, the Greek word for inexpressible is not found in historical records of the Greek language. The first time it appears in ancient literature is here. It seems to be a word that Paul coins to adequately capture the awe and wonder that he sees in the gospel.³

"Inexpressible" means something that is so great, so awe inspiring, so beautiful, so full of wonder, and so magnificent that words cannot adequately describe it. It is indescribable; which means that language itself is inadequate to hold the weight of what is described. There are not words that can fully capture the meaning, value, and significance of what God has done. When Paul thinks about the generosity that he has received his heart overflows with speechless praise.

³ Colin Kruse, 2 Corinthians – Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 169.

Now I've just told you that words are inadequate, but words are all that I have to help you understand what this gift is. The gift is the simple but life-transforming message that is the main theme for the entire Bible, and it is this:

There is a triune God who is both creator of everything (Gen 1:1) and infinitely holy (Is. 6:3). Human beings are natural born sinners (Rom. 3:10-11), violate God's law (James 2:10), and face death (Rom. 6:23) and judgment in Hell (Mt 25:30-46) from a righteous God because of our passive and active depravity. Self-atonement is impossible since every sacrifice would be tainted by our sinfulness (Is 64:6). In ourselves there is no hope for reconciliation with a holy God (Eph 2:12).

But the good news of the Bible is that the second person of the Trinity became a man (John 1:14); his name is Jesus (Mt 1:21), and he lived a perfect, sinless life (Heb. 4:15). He was undeservedly executed on a cross (Mt 27:35), experienced immense shame and painful separation from the Father (Mt. 27:46), personally bore the punishment for the sins of all who would put their trust in Him (John 1:12), and rose again from the grave (1 Cor. 15:20), conquering the power and curse of sin (1 Cor. 15:57) and declaring, once and for all, that He is Lord (Acts 2:36).

The good news of the Bible is that a holy God has made a way to be forgiven (1 John 1:9), to be changed from the inside out (2 Cor. 5:17), and to be brought back into a right relationship with the Creator (Eph. 2:13). And for those who put their faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:8), repent of their sins (Acts 2:38), and follow Christ (Rom. 10:9-10), the Father counts Jesus' death as sufficient for them (Eph 2:14) since through Christ the Father adopts them (Rom. 8:15) and grants complete, imputed righteousness (Rom 8:1).

The good news of the Bible is that based upon the finished work of Jesus a holy God can forgive me (Col. 1:14), be satisfied with me (Eph 2:4), change me (Eph. 4:24), and grant me eternal fellowship with my Creator (Rev 21:3).

This is what it means to be saved. This is the message of the Bible. This is the gospel. This is the good news. This is the inexpressible gift! As Paul said, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).

True generosity – the kind of giving with which God is pleased – is gospel-centered. It flows from the gospel – because of what God has done. It flows through the gospel – because of the grace of God working in you. And it flows to the gospel – because it shows the world how valuable this grace must be.

Let us use man-made currency to do gospel work. Let us convert human money into spiritual blessings. Let us love generosity because we cherish the good news called the gospel!

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