

Title: Generosity
Text: Selected verses from 1 and 2 Corinthians
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Last week we explored Jesus' story of a rich fool who believed that an unexpected bumper crop was his to store rather than to steward. In his story we identified a fundamental truth and a critical choice:

Fundamental Truth: This life (and all that comes with it) is a gift of God on loan to us.

Critical Choice: What will we do with this life (and all that comes with it)?

Today I want to reflect on the critical choice; how do we best use or steward this life and all that comes with it?

Let me say right from the outset that generosity is the key to making the most of the life is on loan to us. God's desire is that we might discover the joy and delight of living a generous life; generous with our time, generous with our gifts and talents and generous with our money and possessions. Our time, our talents and our money are all gifts freely given to us and God longs for us to freely offer them to him and to others.

As he sent his disciples out on mission two-by-two, Jesus commissioned them with these words:

Freely you have received; freely give. (Matthew 10:8)

As Jesus commissioned them, so too he commissions us.

To explore what it means to live a generous life I am going to turn to Paul's letters to the church at Corinth. Corinth was a wealthy port city on the crossroads of two important trade routes. It was a cosmopolitan city that was infamous for its immorality. It was like Rio at carnival time, but 365 days of the year.

Through his missionary work, Paul established the Corinthian church in around 51AD. Paul wrote what we know as his first letter to the Corinthians in around 56AD and his second letter a year later. In both letters, especially the second, he spends considerable time speaking of a Collection. Over three or four years Paul was taking up an offering from the primarily Gentile churches of Thessalonica, Philippi, Ephesus, Corinth and so on to take back to the primarily Jewish believers in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was experiencing both poverty and persecution and Paul saw a taking up a collection as a means of blessing them in their need and to strengthen the ties between Jewish and Gentile believers.

In his encouragement to the church at Corinth to give to the Jerusalem Collection Paul gives us some fundamental principles of Christian stewardship.

The first principle is this:

Generous Giving is Sacrificial Worship

A common misconception about Christian worship is that it is what we do for an hour or so on Sunday. This is a service of celebration that enables corporate worship, but it is not worship in its fullest sense.

Christian worship is responding to the grace of God with our lives.

In first eleven chapters of Romans, his last and most brilliant written work, Paul spells out the essence of the gospel – the Good News of what God has done for us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Then there is chapter 12.

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Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.
(Romans 12:1)

Worship is response. Freely God has given us everything in Jesus. All of God's promises find their 'yes' in him - God's promise of forgiveness and restoration and eternal life and the list goes on. The grace we have experienced through Jesus Christ came at the cost of his life. The response this grace requires us to offer our lives back to God – all of it, including our money and possessions.

Paul suspected the church at Corinth was holding back in responding to the grace of God with their finances. He reminded them that the church in Macedonia gave until it hurt, and then some more.

Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.
(2 Corinthians 8:2)

Even though they were poor the church in Macedonia gave joyfully and generously as an act of sacrificial worship.

Make no mistake, if you truly want to follow God it will cost you. It will cost you your life and everything that comes with it, including your money and possessions.

Towards the end of his life King David grieved God by trusting in his military strength and not God – he had an available army of 1.3million men. In an act of confession and repentance he built an altar to make a sacrifice to God. Seeing what King David is doing, a local farmer offers him a gift of sacrificial animals to use. This was David's response to the offer:

But the king replied to Araunah, "No, I insist on paying you for it. I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."
(2 Samuel 24:24)

We cannot worship God with sacrifices that cost us nothing.

That leads me to a second principle of Paul's teaching.

Generous Giving is a Disciplined Choice

The Christian life is fed and nourished by spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, fasting and bible reading. Through spiritual disciplines, the disciplined and daily choices to act in certain ways, we make ourselves available to the transforming grace of God.

One of the most critical and perhaps devalued spiritual disciplines in today's Christian church is the discipline of generous giving. Why do I say this? Without doubt the god that most competes most with the God of Jesus Christ for our time, attention and ultimately our worship is the god of money.

Every act of sacrificial giving is a turning away from the god of money towards the God of Jesus Christ. Generous giving is a disciplined choice to worship God rather than the stuff God has given us.

Paul says this to the church at Corinth:

On the **first day** of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money **in keeping with your income**.
(1 Corinthians 16:2)

Paul encourages giving that is regular; in this case weekly. Like prayer and bible reading and service, giving should become part of the regular rhythm of our life with God.

He also encourages giving that is proportional; in keeping with one's income.

The biblical standard of giving is the tithe, which at its simplest is giving 10% of our income back to God. The tithe has its roots back in the Old Testament where it was used to serve the poor and to fund temple worship. Today there is a lot of debate in the church as to whether tithing is an Old Testament principle that we can ignore as New Testament Christians. I don't want to address those issues in today's message, but I have included a brochure addressing some of the key questions with the newsletter.

For over fifteen years now our family has made the decision to tithe 10% of our gross income. For us, that means giving 10% of our income to our local church. I know that some of us have made the same choice. Perhaps one the best measures of our church's growth is that God is increasingly giving us a heart of generosity.

As I have shared before, I am a recovering Accountant, so I still have a hankering for graphs and statistics.

This graph tracks the growth in our Sunday adult attendance alongside the growth of our tithes and offerings. As you can see, our offerings are growing at a slightly higher rate than our attendance. Put simply, more people are giving more. This is even more the case when you consider the growth in our giving to Newlife Care and our Acts 1:8 mission projects. Praise God!

I did some other research. Two churches that we have a close working relationship with are Hope Valley Uniting Church and Aberfoyle Uniting Church. They are very similar in size and ministry philosophy to us.

This is what I discovered. The people of Hope Valley and Aberfoyle are, on average, giving 5.5% of the median income for their suburbs. Some people would be giving more, some would be giving less – this is the average.

I did the same calculation for our church. First I looked at our total offerings. Then I looked at our attendance figures to get a per-adult figure. Then I divided that figure into the median income of this area to get a giving percentage. I told you I was a geek!

Here is the result. Our giving percentage is 3.4% - that is, on average each adult gives 3.4% of their disposable income in tithes and offerings.

This tells me a few things. Some of us are giving the tithe or more and have discovered the liberating freedom of generous giving. On the other hand many of us are giving only a little, if we are giving at all. And it tells me that as a church we have a way to travel in discovering the privilege of cheerful giving.

Here is the really exciting part of the research. If we were to lift our giving percentage to the same as Aberfoyle and Hope Valley, it would result in an extra \$371,000 being available for the mission of God through this church. Wow!

Now some of us will be feeling uncomfortable, even a little angry. After all there are lies, damned lies and then there are statistics. Let me assure you, if anything I have overstated our giving rate. You will need to trust me on this. Some of us are doing some mental arithmetic even as I speak working out where we fit. And if you are like me, you are finding good rational reasons why lifting your giving percentage to the tithe, to 10%, just won't work.

It is a consistent fact across the developed world that as our income increases, the percentage of that income we give to charity and the church decreases. Poorer people give far more as a percentage of their income than wealthier people do.

There is a story told of a man who came to Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate, with a concern about tithing. He said: "I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$20,000 a year. I

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could afford to give the \$2,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year."

Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said: "Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?"

The man agreed, so Dr. Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority. "Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."

Pastor and author Craig Groeschel says this:

When it comes to money, it might be easy to trust God when the stakes are low. But when the stakes get high, it is easy to trust in money. (Craig Groeschel)

Groeschel goes on to say that too many of us obsess about our standard of living rather than our standard of giving.

So, how is the standard of your giving?

Every few weeks we clean out our fridge at home. You take a lid of a container and you're not quite sure what you will find; leftover curry, leftover lasagne, leftover stir-fry. Once identified, we then make a choice. The first category is what we can keep and eat? Nothing tastes better than leftover curry that has had time to mature. In the second category is the stuff that needs to be disposed of as bio-hazard waste.

Finally, In between these two categories, is what we can feed to the dog. So we give it to him and watch whether he survives.

We love Corker the one wonky eyed wonder dog. But not so much that we have a problem risking dodgy food on him.

Many of us take same attitude to God as we do to Corker the one-eyed wonder dog. We give God the leftovers.

Let me speak directly. For a professed follower of Jesus to give God our leftovers is a sin – impure and simple.

God does not want our leftovers, he wants our first fruits. God does not want part of us, he wants all of us.

Let me ask again, how is the standard of your giving?

Sue and I still have a long way to go on this journey of giving. That said - this has become our practice now for the last 15 years. It's really simple.

In January each year we sit down and look at what our total, gross income is likely to be for the year. Sue's wage, my wage, allowances and so on. Then we calculate 10% of that figure, I go online to my bank and we arrange for a monthly transfer of that amount into our church's account. That happens on the 21st of each month, one day after my monthly pay hits my account. If we have unplanned income through the year we give 10% of that. We also look to give above our tithe to things like Newlife Care and our Acts 1:8 mission projects. That's us. And for us, especially for me, I cannot adequately communicate what a liberating joy this has been.

Generous giving is a disciplined choice. Next:

Generous Giving is a Kingdom Investment

Paul tells the church at Corinth, when it comes to giving:

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

(2 Corinthians 9:6b)

This is one of the most misinterpreted and misapplied verses in scripture. It has been used to justify the heresy that giving to God is a get rich quick scheme. Now when we manage our lives according to biblical principles – avoiding unnecessary debt, living within our means and giving to the work of God – often we will see our personal finances flourish.

But we give to God not to get rich quick; as an unsubtle demand for more.

We give to God as a response to his grace and for the privilege of participating in his work in the world. And as we do, we will reap a harvest of righteousness and gratitude.

This service you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

(2 Corinthians 9:12)

The church at Corinth was giving to support people they never had, and would never meet. They were giving to people who were separated from them by culture and geography, but to whom they were united in Christ. But their giving would reap a harvest of worship to God.

Last year we decided to take the risk of establishing a new campus of our Crossroads ministry at Helensvale. We committed time, effort, people and we committed money. We made available up to \$15,000 to establish this ministry, knowing that most of us would never likely meet the people Crossroads Helensvale would minister to. People like Chris.

Show Testimony: Chris

Those who sow generously will also reap generously. We have reaped a generous harvest with Crossroads Helensvale.

Here's the exciting thing; I believe there is an even more generous harvest to reap ahead.

As you leave today there will be an envelope for you or your family in the courtyard. In it is this magazine which spells out our mission and ministry plan as a church for 2011. It is by no means all of what we do or are planning to do, but highlights the critical initiatives and goals for next year.

Please read it carefully and prayerfully. Next week I will spend some more time spelling out some of the detail.

The major initiative for next year is our new church plant on the Northern Gold Coast. Our dream and we believe God's vision is to begin a new worshipping community on June 12 next year, Pentecost Sunday. God has provided us the man to lead this new community in Orrell Battersby. God has begun to supply the necessary finances, and now we get to participate in that provision.

We have established a Vision 1000 fund to underwrite our new church plant. We believe we need to raise an additional \$180,000 over the next two years to give it a firm financial foundation. This is money on top of our normal tithes and offerings. It will require vision and commitment and sacrifice.

This magazine and this pledge card provide you the opportunity to commit to this new work of God in and through this church.

Those who sow generously will reap generously. Thornton Wilder put it another way:

Money is like manure; it's not worth a thing unless it's spread around encouraging young things to grow.

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(Thornton Wilder)

Manure that sits in a pile will always just be a pile of manure. But manure that is spread on a garden – that is when manure does its best and most surprising work.

Will we spread the wealth God has given us around and then reap the joy of watching new, young things grow?

Generous giving is a kingdom investment.

Generous Giving is a Joy-filled Privilege!

Paul implores the church at Corinth:

But just as you excel in everything....see that you also excel in this grace of giving.
(2 Corinthians 8:7)

For Paul, giving to the work of God was not law, it was grace

Grace, simply defined, is the undeserved and unmerited favour of God.

We don't need to give out of compulsion, or reluctantly but in the freedom of the grace we have experienced through Jesus. When we respond to God's grace with generous giving we discover incredible, overflowing and unrestrained joy.

Later on, Paul says:

God loves a cheerful giver.
(2 Corinthians 9:8)

The Greek word translated as cheerful is hilaros. It can be translated also as joyous. It is also the root word for hilarious. God loves a joy-filled, cheerful, laughter-soaked giver. Every time the offering bag passes us by we should be belly laughing.

You see, we get to do this. We get to invest in the advancement of God's kingdom the gifts we don't own, but which God gave us on loan in the first place. God does not need our generosity to achieve his purposes, but he chooses too use our generosity anyway. This is grace. Freely we have received, and freely God longs for us to give. One of our young adults posted this statement on Facebook this week. It says:

Generosity is not parting with what is yours, but sharing what's God's.

We get to spread around what is already God's and then watch as it reaps a harvest of changed lives and transformed communities. Who would want to miss out on this privilege?

My mum and dad are grey nomads. They spend a few months each year towing their caravan to somewhere warm around our country. They are enjoying a richly deserved retirement. My brother, sister and I joke with them that they are spending our fairly meagre inheritance. Their response is; 'Exactly!'

The fact is that many of us are wasting the rich inheritance we have received from God as his sons and daughters on stuff that will not last. We are more concerned about our standard of living than our standard of giving. My prayer is that all of us might discover the liberating freedom and the rich harvest that comes with investing our inheritance – including the material resources God has blessed us with – in the kingdom of God.