

The Reward of Generosity

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Last week we looked at a cluster of accounts in the gospel of Luke which illustrate that generosity in giving is a natural expression of putting God first in our lives. We saw that the rich young ruler went away sad when Jesus told him to sell all he had and give to the poor; money, not God, occupied first place in his life. We saw that when Zaccheus experienced salvation he was more generous than he had to be; generosity was a natural expression of putting God first in his life. We saw that the widow gave out of her poverty; generous giving is for everybody, not only for those with a surplus.

When God is first in our lives, we progressively become more generous in every area of our lives – our speech, our relationships, our service, and our giving. Giving is simply one area of the Christian life that should reflect the generosity of God.

This morning we are going to consider a passage of Scripture that emphasizes the reward of generosity. You may be surprised to hear how God will reward you if you are generous in giving. The passage we're going to consider today has the ability to spark our imaginations and reframe the way we think about our future financially. Let's consider 2 Corinthians 9:6-11.

During the years of 52 to 57 a.d. Paul spent a large amount of time and energy organizing a collection for the believers in Jerusalem who were poor. There were several factors that contributed to their poverty. First, when a Jewish person became a follower of Jesus in the first century, the Jewish community discriminated against them both socially and economically. It was hard for Jewish believers in Jerusalem to earn a decent living. Second, the inhabitants of Palestine were taxed heavily by the Roman Empire in addition to their obligations to the temple. Third, a famine (which had been prophesied by Agabus in Acts 11) hit that part of the world in 46 a.d. during the reign of Claudius. This famine exacerbated already harsh economic conditions for the poor church in Jerusalem. Paul and the other leaders in Antioch organized a collection among the Gentile churches for the poor in Jerusalem (see Romans 15:25-27).

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 Paul is encouraging the Corinthian church to make good on its pledge to collect money for the poor in Jerusalem. In 2 Corinthians 9:6 Paul articulates a principle that he'll apply to the topic of giving.

The Principle: Reaping is proportional to sowing (2 Cor. 9:6) The Corinthians had promised a "bountiful/generous gift" (v. 5). As an encouragement to fulfill their pledge, Paul writes this::

6 Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

You don't have to be a farmer to "get" what Paul is saying here. If you put a few seeds into the ground, you will harvest a small crop. Generally speaking, if you sow many seeds you will harvest a large crop. Paul used this observation from the world of agriculture to emphasize that in the Christian life there is a cause and effect relationship between what we do and what we experience spiritually; our actions have real-life consequences. This isn't true in an absolute

sense; we aren't machines, and we can't program our spiritual growth. And there are many factors that are outside of our control. Nevertheless our actions have real-life consequences. We reap proportional to what we have sown.

In Galatians 6 Paul used this same imagery of sowing and reaping with a similar emphasis.

7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9 Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.

Paul points out that the principle of sowing and reaping can work both ways: either for righteousness or unrighteousness. If a person "sows to his own flesh" the consequences are corruption; if we feed our flesh with sinful thoughts and actions, we will experience spiritual decay. Most of us can think of times when we've indulged the flesh in ways that have shut down our spiritual growth. As surely as planting corn will produce corn and nothing else, sowing to the flesh will produce corruption.

By contrast, the person who "sows to the Spirit" – thinking and doing things compatible with what the Spirit within us is doing – will "reap eternal life." Keeping in step with the Spirit in this way affects our experience of eternal life (which is found through faith in Jesus). This is why it is so important to adopt a set of spiritual disciplines that fit your temperament and your life situation. When done from the heart by the power of the Holy Spirit, spiritual disciplines help us experience the eternal life that Jesus died to give us. Paul says not to lose heart and give up if you haven't seen that fruit in your life yet; in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. The principle of sowing and reaping is just part of the fabric of the Christian life.

This is vital to remember because sometimes we become passive and basically quit "sowing to the Spirit." It's no huge mystery why we aren't experiencing spiritual fruit. Back in 2 Corinthians 9 Paul uses this imagery to stress that it's no mystery why some people reap huge spiritual harvests and others don't: it's proportional to their sowing.

We'll notice next how Paul applies this principle to the issue of giving. He wants the Corinthians to understand that if they sow generously through their giving, they will also reap generous rewards. The whole issue of rewards makes some people nervous because we have a hard time believing that we can ever have proper motivation when rewards are involved; there's the fear that the Christian life will become mercenary and self-serving. But we'll see that that depends on the rewards.

The Principle Applied to Giving: If we give generously to the cause of Christ, God will give us greater capacity to be generous in the future. (2 Cor. 9:7-11) Let's see how Paul gets to that conclusion. In verse 7 Paul returns to a point that he'd made earlier, namely, that giving should be deliberate and intentional.

7 Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul doesn't tell the Corinthians how much to give. He simply encourages each person to give "just as he has purposed in his heart." His statement presupposes that each person had spent time in thought (and prayer and conversation) about how much to give. The general guideline in Scripture is that giving should be proportional to income (e.g., 1 Corinthians 16:2 and the OT system of bringing tithes). The OT Law required a tithe (10%); the NT doesn't lay down an exact percentage, but most people (myself included) who have studied this topic would argue that a tithe is a good starting guideline. In light of the incredible riches we have been given in Christ Jesus in the new covenant, it's hard to imagine that we should give less today than they gave in the old covenant. I realize that if you're not in the habit of giving, the idea of 10% may seem either crazy or way beyond your ability. It's something to consider and to work toward.

The main thing that Paul encourages is to purpose in your heart what you will give and then to give it. Paul adds, "Not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." This is more evidence that we serve a personal God who notices our attitude. God actually cares about our attitude in giving. Your phone company really doesn't care how cheerful you are about paying your phone bill. It's completely fine if you pay it grudgingly and under compulsion (because you have to); they just want you to pay it! Not so with God. God cares about our attitude. In the book of Isaiah, for example, God said that He was "tired" of them bringing their sacrifices because their hearts weren't in it (Isaiah 1:11-13, 29:13).

But God *loves* a cheerful giver. As you may have heard, the word used there is *hilarion* (the English word hilarious is derived from this term). I've known people who give this way. They absolutely love giving money to the cause of Christ and to people who really need it. Paul tells us that God loves it when people love to give. I think God loves a cheerful giver because He is a cheerful Giver. God doesn't give grudgingly or under compulsion; God loves giving good gifts to people. We're simply being like our heavenly Father when we are cheerful givers.

Verse 8 is significant because it describes what we can expect to reap if we sow generously through our giving:

8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed;

Paul tells them that if they purpose in their hearts what to give and then give it, "God is able to make all grace abound to you." Paul specifically mentions two ways we receive grace from God in response to giving. First, Paul writes that they would "always [have] all sufficiency in everything" – their own needs would be met. This echoes Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where He said that if we seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, "all these things" will be added to us (a reference to things like food and clothes – basic needs). When we give to the cause of Christ and to others, God's grace shows up in the form of our needs being met. We don't normally think of needing *grace* to have our needs met, but biblically speaking we are dependent upon God for everything: the air we breathe, the ability to work, the "common grace" that everybody on the planet receives.

Second, we receive grace in that we “have an abundance for every good deed.” Paul tells the Corinthians that if they follow through on their giving, God would give them the capacity to be generous in the future. Instead of being depleted and unable to ever be generous again, they would have an abundance for every good deed. You can’t always say what this abundance will be, but it will be there. Many times (especially in normal economic times) there is financial abundance to give generously in the future. But God also increases our heart’s capacity to be generous. That’s how love works generally: when we show love to others, our love doesn’t run out; instead of being depleted, we grow in our capacity to love.

In verse 9 Paul gives an example from Psalm 112 to support his point. The psalmist is talking about the person who fears God when he writes:

9 as it is written, "HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS
RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER."

Psalm 112 describes a man who “sowed” generously to the poor; he didn’t keep everything he had for only himself. Consequently “his righteousness endures forever.” In that context, righteousness refers to deeds that are upright. The person who practices righteousness by giving to the poor is blessed with more capacity and opportunity to do more righteousness in the future.

In verses 10 and 11 Paul reiterates what he’s already said, adding that when it comes to sowing and reaping, God is the One who supplies the seed in the first place.

10 Now 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 everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God.

Paul’s point is only persuasive to the person whose ambition is to be as generous as possible in this life (i.e., the cheerful, willing giver described earlier). If your main ambition is to have as much money as possible for “me and mine,” what Paul writes here will be very anticlimactic. But if the cry of your heart is, “God, give me a generous heart so that I can be as generous as possible in the future,” then Paul’s comments are a powerful encouragement. He says that God will multiply your seed for sowing and will increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will have increased capacity to give liberally to others. The end result will be “thanksgiving to God” – a fitting reminder for us given that Thanksgiving is Thursday.

Most of the time when we think about “money and the future” we’re thinking about how much money we will have for ourselves. There’s obviously nothing inherently wrong with personal financial planning; actually I think it’s vital. But it’s often fueled by fear, greed, and envy. Paul is challenging us to think about something we might overlook in our personal financial planning: our personal capacity to give generously in the future.

The thing that often stands in the way is our lack of contentment. If we are forever wanting a higher standard of living, we’ll never be content with what we have and we won’t ever be motivated by the prospect of being able to be more generous in the future. The story is told of a

man who checked into a monastery for a prayer retreat. After showing him to his room, the monk told him, “If there’s anything you think you need, just tell us and we’ll teach you how to be content without it.” There are two ways to be content: you can either *get* more or *want* less. I know it’s tricky talking about this subject because affluence is relative. But eventually we need to get to the point where we say, “God, I am satisfied with the standard of living You’ve given me. My greatest ambition isn’t to keep and spend on myself as much money as I possibly can. When it comes to money, my greatest ambition is to be as generous as possible.” By God’s grace we can each get to that point.

Paul suggests that this capacity for greater generosity in the future is the reward of generosity in the present. In the present we sow generously through our giving so that we can reap the harvest of being even more generous in the future.

Let me suggest two simple applications. In Paul’s terminology, the first is to **“Purpose in your heart” what you will give**. Make an intentional, deliberate determination of what you will give and where you will give it (to the church, to other ministries/missionaries, to the poor directly). This is a good time to think about year-end giving and what you will give next year. Even when there’s surplus, deciding what to give and where to give it can be difficult. Money is one of the most difficult topics to discuss among married couples. One person will accuse the other of being irresponsible and wanting to give away all their money; one will accuse the other of being stingy and not caring about God or other people. It’s usually not quite that simple. Brenda and I have been married 27 years, and this is among the most difficult things for us to talk about. Enter into these conversations prayerfully and humbly. But it’s important to purpose in your heart what you’ll give and then give cheerfully.

Secondly, **Look for the reward of greater capacity to be generous in the future**. In other words, allow God to prove to you the truth of what Paul has written in the passage we considered today. The Christian life becomes an adventure when we actually begin experiencing things that are taught in Scripture. What if giving weren’t something that we simply did because we’re supposed to do, but something we did with anticipation and with legitimate joy? I have to believe that that’s what God wants for us individually and as a church. If that’s what God wants, that’s what we should pursue.