

Genuine Generosity (Philippians 4:14-23)

Faith E Free | Manhattan

8.11.19

A little over 12 weeks ago, when we first began our study of the Book of Philippians, we noted that this was a letter, written by the Apostle Paul, to what seems to have been a very healthy, vibrant, maturing church.

The church at Philippi was one of the healthiest churches Paul ever planted. You can sense Paul's connection and friendship with the people he was writing to. I don't mean to say the letter was without concerns or criticisms. Paul does indeed address a few things he believed needed to be corrected. But overall the tone of the letter is positive, affirming, and full of love.

The letter began, in 1:3, with Paul thanking God in all his remembrance of his friends and fellow Christians in Philippi. Today, in 4:14-23 we will see that the letter ends with Paul thanking those same friends for their remembrance and support of him and his continued work for the sake of the Gospel. The heart and attitude of giving that the Philippians had can be a model for us today as we consider what it means for us to be generous.

So with the last few lines of his letter Paul takes some time to say "thank you" to these kind and generous brothers and sisters in Christ. He wants them to know that although he never asked for a financial gift, it was nonetheless very much appreciated and a blessing to his work.

In 4:14-16 Paul writes,

[14] Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. [15] And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. [16] Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

Philippians 4 (ESV)

V. 14 is a genuine expression of appreciation and admiration for the kindness of the Philippian church. We don't know how much money they were able to send or how often, but we do know that the gifts helped ease and address some of the hardships Paul faced while on his journeys through the Empire.

Paul also says that he regards the Philippians commitment and kindness as a way in which they "share" in his troubles. The word for "share" in the original greek is a word that means to participate, to be part of the action.

Paul does not regard the financial support he receives from this church as sideline work. He feels it is genuine participation in what he is doing. The Philippians weren't just sending money so Paul could go "do missions" on their behalf. He really felt -- Paul really felt -- that their gifts connected this church to God's larger work in the world.

Many of you give to the General Fund here at Faith, which contributes to our overall budget. But you may not be aware that a large portion of the gifts given by you and your fellow congregants goes to help support our missionaries, like Michael and Susan. Financial support is not the only thing we do in missions, and it is not the only way we participate in God's larger global work, but it is a significant way we partner with those we send.

So, on behalf of our missionaries and the leadership of this church allow me to follow in the footsteps of Paul and say to you all: thank you.

- Thank you for sharing some of what God has given to you with others.

- Thank you for caring about missions and year after year approving a large missions budget that allows us to continue our financial partnerships with the people we have sent.
- Thank you for your kindness and for the ways, both financially and especially relationally, you come alongside our international and campus missionaries.
- The gifts are important, and I guarantee you they communicate love, support, and remembrance to our brothers and sisters in Christ who receive them.

In vv. 15-16 we learn that not only had the Philippians generously sent financial support to Paul, but they began doing so very shortly after they had enough believers gathered together to form a church. In v. 15, when Paul says “*in the beginning of the gospel*,” what he means is in the beginning, or from the very start of the Philippians’ experience with the Gospel. So a helpful paraphrase of vv. 15-16 might go something like this:

“You Philippians remember, just as I will never forget, that even though you were new to the Gospel and to the faith you still chose to support me as I left your city and continued beyond Macedonia. No other churches partnered with me like you did. Even when I had only gotten as far as Thessalonica you helped me not just once, but twice!”

Paraphrase by Sam Creagar (NOT Scripture)

Rephrasing the verses in this way helps because it makes a fascinating detail very clear: the first time the Philippians sent Paul a gift was after he had left and gone to Thessalonica.

You can read about this part of Paul’s journey in Acts 16 and 17, but here I want to note that Thessalonica is only around 100 miles away from Philippi. Depending on how Paul got there he’d probably only been gone from Philippi a week or two, and he left shortly after the church has been established.

So, to make sure you are following:

- Paul gets to Philippi, preaches the Gospel, and starts to get a church going there, but quickly gets in trouble with the local law after he heals a girl with an evil spirit.
- Paul (and his traveling buddy Silas) go to prison, end up bringing the jailer and his whole family to faith in Christ, and the next day are told by the local governing authority to get out of town.
- So, after some final instructions to the church leaders (who had been church leaders for maybe a few days), Paul and Silas head for Thessalonica.
- While going about their ministry in that city they get their first surprise: the church in Philippi, perhaps now around 3 weeks old, has sent them money to help them in their ministry work.
- And remember, there’s not venmo or paypal, so for the money to have reached Paul and Silas as fast as it did it likely would have been sent a mere few days after they left the city.

So a church, maybe a week old, decided to send money to some missionaries without being asked to do so...not just once, but multiple times.

That’s how committed this church was to the work of spreading the Gospel. That’s why Paul is so thankful and excited for them. Because he can see that they are already on the path of understanding the worth of the Gospel and its need to be spread all over the world.

How we spend our money says a lot about what we truly value and what we really believe in, and Paul is all smiles when he thinks about how the Christians from Philippi really value and believe in the surpassing worth of more people getting to know Jesus. They happily, readily, eagerly, and generously invest in what they believe can help continue that all important mission.

A fact which, in v. 17 gets Paul really excited.

[17] *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.*

Philippians 4

Again, Paul emphasizes that he hadn't sought the gifts this church was sending. But he was excited to receive them not only because they were an obvious benefit to him, but even more *because of the truly wonderful benefit it was to them, the senders.*

Paul, relentless apostle that he was, can't help but switch back into teaching mode because he wants to be sure his friends understand what their kind gift really means, what it reveals about their hearts.

What excited Paul was not that he'd received some money. I'm sure it made certain aspects of his life a little easier and as we have already seen, was absolutely grateful. But Paul saw something significant in the Philippians act of giving, something that as their friend, pastor, and discipler brought him great joy.

The generosity the Philippians' were so ready to engage was exactly the sort of fruit -- the sort of character and action -- that Paul knew to be the hallmark of true believers. It signaled his friends' transformation.

They hadn't been generous because they wanted to earn or purchase what Paul had taught them. Instead, they had been generous because what Paul had taught them, the Gospel he had shared with them, changed their lives.

Another way to put it (v. 17) is this: ***genuine generosity is evidence of our established and increasing faith in Christ.***

Paul didn't get much time with the Philippians. It would only be natural and human for him to wonder if they'd really understood what he'd shared with them; if they'd really seen the value of the Gospel and were built upon the strong foundation of its truth.

So imagine how good it must of felt for him to receive that first gift. For Epaphroditus knock on his door, sit down with him, and surprise him with a sum of money worth far more than the reach of its monetary value.

Perhaps it's something similar to giving your kids their allowance and then being shocked, proud, and humbled by their willingness to offer it to a hurting friend, add it to your family's support of a missionary, or put it in the church offering on a Sunday morning.

When they do this you know they are showing some maturity, they are thinking beyond themselves, and they want to contribute to something or someone they believe in. You know something about their hearts have grown and changed, and changed for the better.

That's what Paul sees in the lives and character of the Philippians here. Their giving has signaled that the sort of fruit we all hope to see in the hearts and actions of believers (and in our own hearts too!) has started to grow and flourish.

It's actually the sort of thing Paul says he had been praying to happen to the Philippians. Back in Chapter 1, in the opening of his letter, he told them:

[9] And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, [10] so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, [11] filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1 (ESV)

We get the fruit Paul is excited to see -- the fruit of righteousness, the fruit of generosity, the things that reveal our love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self control -- we get these things not through our own efforts, but through our relationship with Jesus. When genuine generosity goes on display, it's because Jesus put it in our hearts. Our faith leads us to trust Him, and when we trust him we find the freedom to give.

This is, in part, why the specific trait of generosity appears in our church's Value Statements:

INTENTIONAL GENEROSITY

Since God is generous we seek to live out intentional generosity as a way of life. We experience deep joy when we choose to be generous with our material and spiritual resources.

So, a question for you to consider this morning: are you genuinely and intentionally generous? Do you experience the sort of deep joy we believe comes with the giving of our material and spiritual resources? How might you be thankful for the ways God has shaped this value in your life...and how might you continue to grow?

(Note: although Paul was mainly focused on financial generosity in this passage, our statement and the Bible's overall teaching includes generosity of all kinds: financial, material, spiritual, talent, abilities, etc)

Paul says our giving produces and reveals the fruit in our lives that is increasing to our credit -- being generous will have a positive spiritual impact on our lives now and the Kingdom to come.

Our faith will grow, our joy will grow, and in some way our heavenly reward will grow as well. Not because of some greatness within ourselves, but because of the greatness, kindness, righteousness, and love Christ shares with us in our relationship with him.

Genuine generosity is evidence of our established and increasing faith in Christ

Paul also says that our generosity has a very clear and terrific benefit: it pleases God.

[18] I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Philippians 4

Biblical truths are not always this clear and simple, so it's best to enjoy them they are: **Our genuine generosity pleases God.**

If you want to make God happy -- and take a moment to appreciate what I'm saying here...if you want to generate the emotion of joy in the heart of God, which is AWESOME to think about -- then be a genuine, cheerful, willing giver of what He has given to you.

Genuine generosity pleases God.

The illustration Paul chooses here is interesting. He says the gifts he received from the Philippians -- and by extension the gifts we give to others in need -- are *“a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God”*.

That’s language straight out of the Old Testament. It’s how priests and prophets use to describe the effectiveness of the burnt offerings meant to atone for sin or petition the Lord for some sort of blessing. If your sacrifice was genuine, if you came to the altar for all the right reasons and in all the right ways, then what you gave was pleasing God.

This is why, when Israel fell into disobedience and injustice was rampant the old Jewish kingdoms, God ended up despising and rejecting their sacrifices. Instead of giving to God out of reverence and respect, they gave with the hope of cajoling or bargaining for his blessing. God’s never been okay with that. That’s not a loving relationship.

And that’s why we needed Christ’s work in the New Testament. Jesus himself is our atoning sacrifice and our advocate in Heaven. We don’t have to try and generate forgiveness through our sacrifice. Christ has that taken care of.

So, the payoff is when we give now we can do so freely, simply because we want to let God know how much we trust Him and how thankful we are to be a part of His redemptive work in the world.

Our generosity pleases Him because it is genuine. It is a response to what He has done for us. It is a reflection of his own kindness and love toward us.

Our challenge, then, is simple: do we want to please God? If our answer is yes, then our action is clear: we need to be generous.

We need to share what we have, what we earn, and what we are given with others. There’s no amount attached to this...it’s all about the action, about the heart behind the matter. Whether you can give a lot or give a little, what really matters is why you give. Is it because generosity pleases God...or it is because you hope it placates Him?

Genuine generosity pleases God. Give in order to go after His heart.

The final point I want to make today comes from v. 19:

[19] And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4

The key to understanding this verse correctly is to keep it within the context of the whole passage.

It’s so very tempting to isolate this verse and read it as a promise that God will supply everything we will ever need at any time throughout our lives.

This sort of thinking leads us down a dangerous path that results in mistakenly believing that our relationship with God is all about a profitable payday. That our obedience will eventually equal prosperity. We start mixing up our “needs” with our “wants”, and get into the bad habit of trying to tell God what our “needs” really are.

Paul’s understanding of how God meets needs, however, is very different. He does not think that our giving and our sacrifices get plugged into some divine equation that produces a certain amount of blessings for ourselves.

Instead, Paul acknowledges that the Phillipians have been filled with a passion for giving, a desire to support him. Because Paul feels that passion is from God, he gladly accepts their gifts, seeing them as a sign of their obedience and faith, and then assures them:

It's up to God to supply what we need to be generous. It's up to us to be generous with what He supplies.

God will supply your every need to continue the work that He's called you to do. Your job is faithfulness. His job is equipping and provision.

If you're tempted to say, "wait just a minute, I thought being generous was part of how we get blessed" consider this: it is a blessing to be generous. The ability to share what God has given you with others is itself an awesome gift from the Lord. It is exactly the sort of thing Christ did. He shared his knowledge, wisdom, Gospel, power, and his life.

If God puts it on your heart to give then He will supply you with what you need to keep giving just as He has called you to follow Christ and supplies you with what you need to keep walking on that path of righteousness.

What Paul is sharing with the Philippians is very similar to what he tried to teach to the Corinthians:

[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 decided in his heart, 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 to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

2 Corinthians 9 (ESV)

Really look and consider what is said here. Yes, if you sow bountifully you will also reap bountifully. But what then do you do with that harvest? Is the prosperity that comes from that work meant for your enjoyment and consumption alone? You thank God for what has been given...and then you give it again.

We're meant to be conduits of God's blessing, not reservoirs. We receive and share, not hoard.

It's up to God to supply what we need to be generous. It's up to us to be generous with what He supplies.

So, what will you do this week with this knowledge? How might you be genuinely generous? What has God given to you that you might be able to reinvest in the lives and blessing of others? How can you show your love for Christ to the world in this way?