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2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15
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Generosity

Good morning. It is good to be back. I want to begin by thanking Sarah Ostrand for covering for me while I was away. Karen and I went to visit our daughters Sofia in New York City and Jordan in Washington DC. Fall is a great time to visit the East Coast. And I say visit. It was absolutely gorgeous. But we continually remind our kids, “West Coast, Best Coast, don’t forget that!” Amen!

But Sarah did a great job preaching on gentleness as one of the fruit of the Spirit. Today I’m going to head in somewhat a different direction and address another fruit, but not one that Paul lists in his letter to the Galatians. It’s not so much a fruit of the Spirit as it is a spiritual gift.

It’s the gift of generosity.

The Bible talks a lot about generosity and how it ought to be a marker of God’s people. The Apostle Paul picks up the theme of generosity in his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians.

While he wrote to strengthen their spiritual maturity in Christ, he also encouraged them to be more generous in their giving towards poorer Christians back in Jerusalem. Paul must have received word somehow about a particular gift that they had planned to give but had not yet done so. Therefore he sent Titus to Corinth to receive that gift and bring it back to Jerusalem safely.

That’s where we pick up his letter today. And from this section, we learn a lot about generosity and what God expects of us in our giving.

Join me as we read from 2 Corinthians 8-9.

8:1 “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. **2** In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. **3** For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, **4** they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. **5** And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. **6** So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier

made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. **7** But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. **9** 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 through his poverty might become rich.

10 And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. **11** Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. **12** For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. **14** At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, **15** as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

16 Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. **17** For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. **18** And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. **19** What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. **20** We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. **21** For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man...

9:5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. **7** Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. **8** And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. **9** As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. **11** You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

So what does this tell us about generosity? A lot actually!

Generosity comes from the very character of God. God is a generous giver who graciously gives to everyone, believer or not. Not only does God provide for us materially, with water for our crops and a harvest in season, but God also gives the gift of God’s very self, through Jesus Christ, his son, who gave himself up for us all. As we are generous, we live into the generous image of God imprinted upon our souls.

Proverbs 11:25 says, “A generous person will prosper, they who refresh others will themselves be refreshed.”

The Hebrew word for generous used here is *barakah*. It means liberal or blessing, as in the benediction blessing given at the end of our service. So as we are generously giving, we are liberally casting our blessing upon others, like seed upon the land.

Proverbs 22:9 says, “A generous person will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.”

The Hebrew word used here for generous is *towb*. It means beautiful, bountiful, or cheerful. It implies more a kindness of one’s heart as we give over flowingly to those in need.

And as we do this, we live into the generous image of God imprinted upon us.

The Greek word that Paul uses in his letter today for generosity is *haplotēs*. It means a copious bestowal, bountifulness, or liberality. During this time of year we see cornucopia overflowing with the fruits of the harvest, like the ones we have displayed up front. Thank you Laura Livingston for the beautiful setting in which we worship.

Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For

the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”¹ Essentially what he was saying was, “The more we give, the more we will receive.”

The next thing this tells us is that generosity is contagious. The Macedonian gift stirred the Achaians to generosity, which in turn inspired the Corinthians. That’s why in our budget brochure you’ll read about real people who share their stewardship stories and why giving to the church has been so important to them.

People give to mission and impact. People give to stories. That’s why you also see faces of the people that our church impacts and our missional footprint beyond our budget. The truth is, without your generosity, none of this would happen.

Generosity also requires sacrifice. Paul identified the Macedonian church and how they gave out of their poverty, during a very difficult season of life...which is just the opposite of when we might expect for people to give. Typically, we give out of abundance, not out of poverty. And we give when times are good, not bad. Paul lifted up the Macedonians for doing just the opposite.

Sir Henry Taylor once said, “He who gives what he would readily throw away, gives without generosity; for the essence of generosity is in self-sacrifice.”²

In the same way, Jesus lifted up the example of a poor widow who gave two small coins from her poverty, as a more righteous offering than a rich person who gave from their abundance.³ You see for the rich person, it wasn’t a sacrifice. But for the poor widow, it cost her everything she had to live off of. It was a sacrifice that came at a price.

Billionaire Warren Buffet reportedly once said in an interview about his \$26 billion gift to the Gates Foundation: "My gift has not changed my lifestyle one bit. I still go to the movies I want to go to and eat at the restaurants I want to eat at. But what about the person who gives a gift that requires they can't go to the movies or eat out. They are the true givers—the true heroes [of generosity].”⁴

¹ Luke 6:38

² Sir Henry Taylor, quoted in *New Beginnings*. Christianity Today, Vol. 34, no. 3.

³ Mark 12:41-44

⁴ R. Mark Dillon, *Giving and Getting in the Kingdom* (Moody Publishers, 2012 pg. 29

And likewise, while the Macedonians didn't have a lot to give. They realized that they could share what they had with those in Jerusalem who had even less. "In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

Generosity is to be planned. It doesn't just happen on its own. It is a conscious choice that we make, a fruit that must be cultivated. But the truth is the more we plan and exercise our plan to give, the more generous we will become. In Paul's letter today, we wrote about the gift the Corinthian Church had planned to make. Think of it as Paul receiving their planned giving card for the fall stewardship campaign that we are asking for today. Paul was eager to receive that gift and to deliver it to those who could use it most.

But it still required a plan to be put in place for them to follow through. That's where our planned giving is such a help. We look at the resources we have available and then we make a plan to give that for the year.

Generosity is to be without compulsion, but with a cheerful heart. Paul said, "Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

And so we aren't going to guilt anyone into giving. Nor are we like some churches who demand that we give a certain amount or we'll be ostracized. No! That is a decision between each of us and the Lord. But Paul also gave this warning to the Corinthians, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

Generosity is to be equitable. While we don't give equal gifts, we are called to make equal sacrifices. This is why Paul exhorted the Corinthians saying, "The gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what they don't have."

However, generosity is to come from a theology of abundance, not a theology of scarcity. We give because God has already given us more than we need. And as we give generously, we trust that God will take care of all our needs. Who of us can out give God?

Generosity is to be a way to exercise our discipleship of Jesus Christ. Our mission at Cascades is to be Jesus' faithful witnesses to Jerusalem (our people), Judea (our neighborhoods), Samaria (the marginalized), and to the ends of the earth (the poorest of the world's poor). How we do that is through worship, Christian education and prayer.

If generosity is an area in which we could grow, then let me suggest a few ideas to get us started.

If you have never given or turned in a planned giving card, fill one out and hand it in today. Even if all you can commit to is \$25 or \$50 per month, that is a start. But plan it and then set it up on automatic withdrawal from your bank account. It is a tool that will help you stay true to what you have planned, especially if you are away from home for lengths of time.

I know that not everyone might feel like they can tithe at 10% of their gross income which the Bible calls for. But what if you took one month a year, to test drive tithing? That month give at 10% and see how it feels. Or what if you took baby steps each year. What would it look like if you increased giving by just 1% each year and see where that takes you?

This step chart was posted in your Narrative Budget Brochure. It reflects the planned gifts of our congregation which people reported on their cards for 2024. Can you see where you fall on the chart?

What if you took a leap of faith and committed to step up to the next level for 2025? Could you do that?

These are just a few things that we can do to exercise our discipleship and generosity as followers of Jesus Christ.

Let me close by telling you about some of our most generous givers.

Joan Detrick is new to our congregation just this past year. Time and time again, Joan shows up with a servant's heart. You will often find Joan weeding the beds around the church, unannounced. She just loves to weed. Joan recently became a deacon and to get to know her flock, she's invited members of her flock to her place for waffles. Did you know how delicious peanut butter and lemon syrup can be on waffles? Joan also is part of our Helping Hands ministry on Thursday afternoons, creating beautiful artwork and quilts to be given to people in their times of need. That's generosity.

Walt and Mary Oswalt. Walt is our grounds gardener. He too is often here pruning bushes, watering plants, planting trees or wildflowers, unannounced. He cares for our property as he would his own. And Mary has served in many capacities at the church. As a Personnel Elder, member of the personnel committee, as a deacon, and also a Helping Hands Ministry member. That's generosity.

Cordell Beck just rotated off session as our Technology Elder. But you'll often see Cordell behind the sound table, running games with his dad Greg at Vacation Bible School or serving as a youth leader. This is despite the fact that he has a busy young family and still carves out time to help us do what needs to be done. That's generosity.

Heather Hartrim-Lowe also just rotated off session as our elder of Christian Education. But Heather is behind the scenes of most things at the church. Coordinating VBS, mission trips to Honduras, or hosting our annual summer picnic at their home. That's generosity.

Janet VanFleet is our current elder of Mission and Peace. Janet keeps our attentions focused beyond our walls to serve those in our community who we have yet to meet. She also coordinates mission trips to Honduras, serves in VBS, and is the brain child behind much of the artistic beauty placed around the church. That's generosity.

Betty Scott has served multiple years as a deacon moderator and most recently as a member of our Benevolence Board. Betty has years of experience working in the mental health and social services and comes alongside under resourced families in our community who might need financial assistance in order to prevent becoming homeless. Betty spends hours on the phone with desperate families, Family Community Resource Coordinators, and landlords trying to figure out the best way to keep roofs over these people's heads. That's generosity.

And then there are Sue Holcomb and Deborah Shaner who cook our pancakes every first Sunday of the month, like this morning. They make the best pancakes with so much love. But it takes preparation, thoughtfulness, and dedication to show up each time. And have you noticed that they don't just give us pancakes with syrup. No! You can have blueberry or raspberry compote with whipped cream on top of them too! That's generosity.

And I could talk about so many others that we'd be here for hours. But I think you'll want to go home.

Now I have no idea how much these people give financially to our church. But we see how the spirit of generosity has been cultivated through their lives and service of Jesus Christ among us.

This communion table before us represents the generosity of a God who would stop at nothing to lavishly bless us with good gifts. For here, God showers us with grace, forgiveness, and inclusion as God's children in a beloved family. All are welcome to the table. All have a place at the table.

Hear the blessing that Paul spoke over the people of Corinth.

"Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God." Amen!