

Sermon 153: Romans 12:8: The Gift of Giving

OUTLINE

Giving with simplicity
Giving with generosity

INTRODUCTION

The next spiritual gift that Paul mentions for us is the gift of giving, Rom. 12:8, 'the one who contributes; in generosity.' We are all called to serve with the abundance God has given us. Some have an abundance knowledge and are called to teach; some have an abundance of sympathy and give in mercy, some have an abundance of practical skill and give out of that abundance. The gift of giving is serving with our material abundance. There are those who are providentially situated to be generous, that is why Paul commands the rich to be generous, 1 Tim. 6:17-19, 'As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. 18 They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.' But the gift of giving is not only in those who have means to be generous, but whose hearts have been gripped by grace that even out of their poverty, or whatever resource they have be it time or talent, they give generously with it. Mark 12:41-44, 'And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. 43 And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. 44 For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Paul tells us in 12:8 that those with the gift of giving they should do it generously. Now there are two possible understandings of the word 'generous'. It could mean 'sincerity' or it could mean 'generosity.' The word can literally mean 'simplicity.' The sense being, with singleness of heart and intent, hence the meaning 'sincerity.' This is how it is translated in 2 Cor. 11:3, 'But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.' But the notion of generosity is just as viable, 2 Cor. 8:2, 'for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.' We will not choose between the two but show how both are apt as we look at the gift of giving. So today as we explore the gift of giving we will look at giving and sincerity, giving and generosity.

Giving with simplicity

There are many people who give for all the wrong reasons. In the first century when Jesus came to Israel they were very religious and giving was a show where one demonstrated their holiness by the gifts they gave. Jesus warns about this in Matt. 6:1-4, "'Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is

doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.’ Now Jesus speaks first about giving in order to be seen by others. Some will give big gifts to the poor, but they do it in order to get the applause and appreciation of others, not because they love their neighbour and they want to please God. However, they wouldn’t give the gift if no one else ever knew about it. Some give so that they can have a plaque raised with their name on it, that others will talk about how generous they are. Jesus tells us that if this is our motive of we are doing good, merely to look good to others, and not out of a sincere motive to please God, then our only reward will be the applause of the crowd we were trying to satisfy. Jesus tells us that we should be so unselfconscious that it were as if the right hand did not know what the left hand is doing. I was sitting with a group of ministers this week and they were telling me how certain churches publish who the biggest givers were and the their amounts the past week. This is against what Jesus is teaching and breeding a giving for the wrong reasons.

The classic NT example is the example of Ananias and Sapphira. Acts 5:1-11, The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. In fact the love of anything before God is the root of all kinds of evil. In Acts 5:1-11 we have the sad story of two people in the Church, Ananias and his wife Sapphira, they were not sincere in their generosity, but driven by the love of money and the love of the approval of man. This led them into sin and God judged them. Satan could not stand to see the Church do well so he constantly tried to overthrow her. He has tried persecution in Acts 3-4, but that hasn’t worked, in fact it had the opposite effect of sending them to God in prayer. Then the people started being generous and helpful to each other, so here Satan is attempting to get his foot in the door by tainting their generosity with selfishness, and their servanthood with self-promotion. Barnabas, in 4:36-37, sold a field and received a commendation from the apostles, and no doubt his special mention in the Scriptures reflects the attention he received from those early Christians for his good deed. Ananias and Sapphira also wanted this attention and fame, they wanted the respect of the people, but also wanted to keep some of the money. Perhaps as some do they wanted to buy their way into a place of influence and prominence. They wanted the fame of being charitable, but without the cost. This is a perfect example of the sort of giving that is not sincere.

In Christianity today we are being overrun with the prosperity gospel. The fastest growing part of the church in the third world are the charismatic and Pentecostal churches. And the prosperity gospel is spun by charismatic and Pentecostal preachers, therefore we have an epidemic on our hands. Let me be clear that not all of them are tainted by this teaching, but a large group are. The most popular teachers on Christian TV like Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen are prosperity teachers and encourage a giving that is not sincere. The unbiblical premise of the prosperity gospel is that Jesus died not only to save us from our sins, but also from our sickness, but also from our poverty. In other words, Jesus death on the cross not only removes the condemnation of the law over us, but releases blessing so that you can be rich and successful in this life. They misappropriate promises to Abraham for themselves and teach a view of confession and brazen faith that orders God to do things for them. It is a man centred view of things, it sees no place for suffering in the Christian life which is necessary for witness and growth, and it encourages us to be greedy and demanding. They often teach a seed principle, which is that you sow a seed and expect a harvest, you give ten dollars and expect a hundred in return. The bigger the faith, the bigger the gift, the bigger the harvest you are told to expect. So giving is seen as a mechanical silver bullet to getting rich. This runs contrary to what Paul is saying here. 2 Cor. 9:10-11 does promise a blessing to those who give freely and joyfully, ‘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.' God gives to givers, in order that they would have something to give. This verse nowhere licences you to expect to be a millionaire or to have everything you could ever imagine, but it does say that God gives to givers, in order that they can give more; not to satisfy our greeds. God supplies where He commands is the confidence of every believer, Paul says it again in other words in the same context, 2 Cor. 9:8, 'And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.' It is a provision for ministry message not a prosperity message.

Giving with generosity

All our serving or giving is Christ shaped; therefore it is grace driven and is inevitably lavish and generous. So giving generously is an understandable translation of the verse before us. A wonderful example of generous giving is found in 2 Cor. 8-9. Paul is writing to the saints in Corinth who a year earlier had made promises about helping the saints in Jerusalem who had been suffering due to a famine. Paul is writing to indicate he is sending a man to remind them of their promise and to encourage them to give well. This portion is so instructive about Christian giving that come have called it 'a philosophy of Christian giving.'

Paul begins stimulating the Corinthians to give by showing how God's grace has worked in others to give, v1, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.' The Philippians and Thessalonians would be among this group. Notice this note about grace. It is grace that enables them to give to people they have never met; it is grace that enables them to act spontaneously to needs; it is grace that enables them to do it sacrificially. V2, 'for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.' Here we see a group of Christians who are in a severe test of affliction, probably poverty as a result of persecution. And yet because of the abundance of joy, the joy of sins forgiven, the joy of eternity secure, the joy of life everlasting, they are able to give out of their poverty.

Their hearts are revealed in the freedom of their giving, V3, 'For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord.' They even begged to be able to partake in the giving, because it is likely that Paul would not have asked them given their financial situation, v4, 'begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.' The word 'relief' is the word diakonia/service, the same root word Jesus uses to describe His laying down His life for us, Mark 10:45. Their giving was not done as a way of pleasing man but as their service to God, v5, 'and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.' But notice that they put themselves at the apostle's disposal to be used in any way they saw fit in this situation.

Verses 6-7 explain that Titus is being resent to them, to prepare them to excel in this grace as well as all the other manifestations of grace God has gifted them with, 'Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 7 But as you excel in everything---in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you---see that you excel in this act of grace also.'

V8 is very important because it reminds us that our giving is not firstly the fulfilling of a command to give, rather it is the evidence of a new life and love within us, 'I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.'

Notice Paul's assumption here how he expects love to issue not merely in warm emotion but action.

V9 is the heart of the passage and the driving force behind generous giving, '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.' There is no need to bully our consciences to be generous because we know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. We do not need to be convinced with protracted arguments because we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We do not need to be commanded because we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. 'You know.' Every Christian knows this soul enrapturing truth. 'That though He was rich, yet for our sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.' Paul uses the full title here, the 'Lord Jesus Christ.' Lord being a reference to His deity, His glory. Jesus of course reminds us of His humility and humanity, and Christ reminds us of His death and the position of authority He holds as the Davidic king at God's right hand. No doubt Paul is seeking to fill our minds with this fullness so we can appreciate what He has indeed done for us.

'Though He was rich.' How little do we know what this means. Here one who is equal with the Father, one before whom angels fall in worship. One to whom all creation owes its due, and whose majesty no one can capture in words. The one who owns all things and sustains all things and for whom all things exist. He is the one who became poor for us. He never became less than God in becoming man, but His glory was veiled. 'Yet for your sake' who are we? We are vile offending sinners who deserve nothing but judgement, yet heavens best is given for earth's worst. This humiliation for our sakes was absolutely necessary. Without Jesus coming to pay for our sins by His death we would not be able to be saved. 'He became poor.' Some might think that this is a reference to his earthly poverty, that He was born in a stable, and at the end had all things taken from Him, even His clothing was gambled for. The poverty in view is His incarnation and His humiliation in suffering the wrath of God. The fact that He was born is much more significant than that He was born in a stable. The fact that He suffered the wrath of God as a criminal is more significant than the fact that the Romans mistreated Him. He suffered our world's greatest indignities, yes, but we are saved not by His being born poor and having His possessions removed, but by His incarnation and His death in payment for our sins on the cross. 'So that you by His poverty might become rich.' By Him serving us, dying for us, giving up all that was legitimately His we are benefitted. We are not merely provided for, we are made rich. He has suffered the worst things possible that no mere man can endure; and we receive the best possible blessings creatures can possibly receive. We are raised higher than angels in status, in glory and in riches. We are adopted children of God, made into the likeness of the resurrected Christ, and are made co-heirs with Him. Life everlasting and God as our eternal portion; we could not be richer.

Paul knows he does not need to command the Corinthians to be generous, all we need is a reminder about how God has been generous to ones so undeserving. Any heart confronted with these truths will be planning how to give more not less. Paul reveals that he is not twisting the arm of the unwilling but stirring up the willing, 'And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it.' Notice as well, the reality that giving blesses the giver. Paul quotes Jesus to the same effect in Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." The benefit of holiness, spiritual fruit, the joy of following in the footsteps of Christ and many other things will be our portion.

Now in Acts 2 and 4 we see many Christians selling their possessions and giving the benefits to the poor. Some have taken this to be a literal and universal application of the words to the rich young ruler to sell everything you have and follow Christ. But a giving to the poor that in turn makes you poor is not what is expected, Paul makes this clear in v12-14, 'For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 13 For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness 14 your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness.' Here Paul is encouraging to give in proportion to what you have not a kamikaze style giving. If giving is putting you in a place of need then your zeal needs to be tempered with knowledge. I do not want to take off the table the possibility of giving sacrificially, there may in fact be times when you can bear loss in order to alleviate urgent and immediate needs. The example of Christ certainly models this. But Paul is telling us that the normative principle in our giving is out of our abundance meeting others needs, so that there is a kind of equilibrium. At times you will be the one with more, at other times another, let us serve one another when this is the case. Behind this thinking is the notion of stewardship. We are guardians of the gifts God gives us not owners, we are called to distribute them in accordance with His will not hoard them according to ours. It should be stressed that this is not a type of forced socialism, but free and mutual sharing. This is also not a case of a handout situation where all the giving is from one side. The idea is also not one of enforced commune living where no one owns anything to share; nor communism where laws enforce equality. Paul is advocating a grace driven mutual sharing out of our abundance in proportion to what we have, but always with the option of imitating Christ further in sacrificial giving. It seems that Paul quotes the OT situation where manna was being gathered in the wilderness from Ex. 16:18 to show that hoarding is not beneficial. God gave manna to Israel daily, and those who tried to the extra and keep it over, it rotted and did not benefit them. It seems Paul is quoting this verse to impress this reality on the Corinthians.

When Paul calls those with the gift of giving to give generously, these are the other principles that Paul has in mind that regulate what he means. Our giving is to be stimulated by grace; it is to be proportional to what we have; it is to be generous, even sacrificial, though impoverishing yourself is not what is intended; we give to meet needs out of our abundance; we give expecting a blessing in the form of spiritual benefits and to get more to give; we give in order to give arms and legs to love; we give not under compulsion but out of the gratitude for what Christ has done for us. We will pick up next week with the question of giving or tithing?