

## **Growing In Generosity**

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on February 24, 2019*

This morning we turn to the sixth sermon in our seven part sermon series on 2 Corinthians. We will be reading from 2 Corinthians, chapter nine, verses six through fifteen.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” 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 for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

In Brad Henshaw’s autobiography, he tells his readers how God took him from being a drugged up, irresponsible hippie, and turned him into a devout follower of Jesus, and then into a no nonsense preacher. In telling his story, Brad recalled the many people whom God used to guide him on his spiritual journey. While everyone of these individuals played a role in his conversion, there was one couple in particular whose influence played the greatest role in his transformation.

In describing the impact of this special couple on his life, Brad noted that they were the kind of people who were committed to do whatever it takes to reach people for Jesus. For example, they routinely welcomed transients into their home, like Brad. Furthermore, they lived a simple lifestyle; giving half of their income to the church so that the kingdom of God might advance. And through their effort, and through their sacrifice many lives were touched, including Brad’s.

That being said, many will hear a story like this and ask themselves, “isn’t that a little bit too much?” Is it right for people to sacrifice so much for God? What is reasonable? How much of ourselves should we give to help out others? When it comes to contributing to the kingdom of God how much should we sacrifice?

In our Scripture reading this morning the Apostle Paul addressed this very question. As we noted in our sermon from last Sunday, Paul had made a special appeal to the church in Corinth to offer financial assistance to the church in Jerusalem. The reason for the appeal was that a severe famine had left the Jewish believers in Judea in a state of poverty. Being aware of their need, and being deeply attached to the people, Paul asked the Corinthians (as well as the believers in all the churches that he had planted) to give money to help relieve the suffering of the Jewish Christians.

In his encouragement to the Corinthians, Paul noted in our reading from last week how the churches of Macedonia had contributed a very generous gift for their Jewish brothers and sisters even though they themselves were also very poor. And Paul challenged the Corinthians to also discover the same spirit of generosity and act on it. He also challenged them to look to the example of Christ, who laid down his life for us, as a model of how we might serve others in need.

Continuing with his encouragement towards generosity, in today's reading, Paul answers four questions that each answer the question, "How do we decide how much to give?" Here is what he had to say.

In verse six, Paul responds to the question, "How do you decide how much to give?" by answering the question, "How much do you want to reap?" It's really a helpful question to ask. For example, if you are a farmer and if you are wondering how much seed you should plant in the spring, the question you need to ask yourself is, how many bushels do you hope to harvest in the fall? Because the number of bushels you hope to harvest determines the amount of seed that you will plant. The same is true in the kingdom of God. If we want to reap an abundant harvest, we need to sow seeds of generosity, kindness and love. And the more seeds we plant, the greater the harvest will be.

This is one of the reasons why Jesus traveled continuously throughout his three year ministry preaching the good news of the kingdom, while also healing the sick, making the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, casting out demons, and even raising the dead. This is also one of the reasons why Paul traveled tirelessly around the known world, telling people about Jesus, planting churches, nurturing those churches that had already been established, and performing the same miracles that Jesus had performed during his earthly ministry. Why? Because you have to plant a lot of seed if you want to have a big harvest.

The second question Paul answers in response to the question, "How do you decide how much to give?" is, "How much can you cheerfully give?" In verse seven, Paul instructs the Corinthians that God loves a cheerful giver. Furthermore, he tells them that they are not to give money out of a sense of guilt or duty. Rather, the gift they give

should be offered from the heart.

A great Biblical story that wonderfully illustrates this point is the story of the little boy with the five small loaves and the two fish. In this story, Jesus instructed his disciples to feed a crowd in excess of five thousand, even though they had no food. Perplexed by Jesus' instruction, and certain that what he asked was impossible to do, they brought to Jesus a little boy who had five loaves and two fish so they could at least make the claim that they tried to fulfill Jesus' impossible request.

What is so great about this story is that the little boy cheerfully gave all that he had to Jesus. And to everyone's dismay, Jesus took the little that the boy gave him and used it to feed a multitude such that everyone had plenty to eat, and twelve basketfuls of left overs were collected. This miracle demonstrated once and for all that little can be much in Jesus' hands if we are willing to surrender the little that we have so that God can multiply and use it for His good purposes. But, remember, God loves a cheerful giver.

The third question Paul answers in response to the question, "How do you decide how much to give?" is, "How much can you afford to give when you know that God is your provider?" Another way of stating the same question is, "How strong is your faith?" If we have strong faith, then we know that God is our provider, and if God is for us, then nobody can be against us. Armed with this kind of faith, we are able to give more generously.

This is what Paul is talking about in verses eight through ten. This principle is wonderfully illustrated in the Bible by the faith of the malnourished widow from Zarephath, who offered her last bit of food to the prophet Elijah, because she believed that God would provide for her needs. And true to her faith, God provided for her family's needs, ensuring that there was always flour in her jar and oil in her jug until the severe famine in the land had ended.

The fourth question Paul answers in response to the question, "How do you decide how much to give?" is, "How much do you want to please God?" In verses eleven through fifteen of today's reading, Paul challenges the Corinthians to think about this question as they determine how much they will contribute to the offering Paul was collecting to help out the poor Christians in and around Jerusalem.

When I think on Paul's challenge to the Corinthians, I am reminded of the story of the woman who poured a bottle of perfume, worth a year's wages, on Jesus' head just before he was arrested and crucified. In doing so, the only consideration that drove her actions was how she might please Jesus. All other considerations, such as practicality, following the customs of the day, and preserving her honour were irrelevant. In offering her lavish gift she was motivated solely by the desire to please

Jesus. And two thousand years later, we are still talking about what she did, just like Jesus said we would. This is what a heart set on pleasing God can accomplish.

And for this reason, Paul urged the Corinthians in today's Scripture reading to seriously consider this matter as they determined how much they should contribute to the collection he was making for the destitute Christians in and around Jerusalem. In their consideration of how much they should give, Paul urged them to think about what kind of harvest they wanted to reap for the kingdom of God, and then to sow seeds according to the measure of the harvest they desired to obtain.

In addition to this, Paul urged the Corinthians to reflect on how much they could give cheerfully, because God loves a cheerful giver. Thirdly, Paul called the Corinthians to ponder the strength of their faith, and then to give to the cause in a measure equal to their faith. And finally, Paul asked the Corinthians to ponder how deep was their desire to please God and then again to offer a gift that accurately reflected this desire.

This was how Paul instructed the Corinthians in today's reading as to how much they should contribute to the special collection that he was taking. And this was how Paul instructed the Corinthians on how they should determine what amount to give to those in need in their midst as other needs arose. And this was how Paul instructed the Corinthians on how they should determine how much of their time, treasure, and talent they should contribute to the work of the kingdom of God in the moment, and in the future.

And this is how Paul is instructing us in these matters today. Therefore, as followers of Jesus who have been called to be Christ's hands and feet in this world, may we respond to the needs around us, and may we respond to Christ's invitation to co-labour with him in the vineyard by generously offering our time, treasure and talent.

And as we ponder how much we should give may we remember that we will reap according to what we sow, that God loves a cheerful giver, that we should give according to the measure of faith that we possess, and that we should give according to the measure that we desire to please the living God. These are the four considerations that Paul left for us, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, in today's reading, to guide us in our charity. And by God's grace, may they help us unlock a spirit of generosity within us so that we might be a blessing to others and bring glory to God.