

Now is the Time for Love

Love Gives: The Power of Generosity

Confronting the Sin of Greed

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Sunday, March 6, 2005

When archeologists unearthed the ruins of ancient Pompeii, the first skeleton they found was still grasping silver coins in its bony fingers. When they unrolled his fingers, the coins rolled away with a mocking clink. What a perfect picture of greed in action! A few years ago PBS ran a special series called “Affluenza” which diagnosed a deadly disease afflicting families today. According to the PBS website the “bloated, sluggish and unfulfilled feeling” of **Af-flu-en-za** comes from “an epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream.” We want more and we’ll get it even if it makes us sick. Greed is still destroying us. We’re still clutching our silver coins.

Greed defined. What is greed? It’s not desire in itself. It’s the immoderate or inordinate craving for things. It is the skeleton clinging to the silver coins. Greed is the monster of more: I must have it and once I have it I must keep it. It is not so much the love of possessions as the love of possessing. So we buy and own more stuff than we could possibly use: more cars, bigger cars, faster cars, more house than we can possibly use, more furniture than we could ever sit on and enjoy, more clothes than we could possibly wear, more books than we could possibly read (ouch!).

For a while, at least in Western cultures, we swallowed the “anti-gospel” of greed: greed is good; greed is beautiful; greed makes the world go round; so go for it; grab what you can. But after Enron, etc., that seems so hollow and ugly. The greed of capitalism and the power of communism taste like dirt in our thirsty mouths. Deep down we know that greed really does make us miserable and sick. We’re searching for a deeper, soul-satisfying Gospel.

Perhaps we’re even ready to listen to the ancient words of the Bible: “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:19). The New Testament also teaches that greed is idolatrous and it brings down the wrath of God (Colossians 3:5-6). Jesus warned us, “Beware of greed.” (Luke 12:15). Jesus also said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21). In other words, what you do with your money (and possessions) is a good signal of what your heart is pursuing. Or, what we do with our money and stuff reveals what we believe God is doing with us.

The consequences of greed. Greed is bad because it destroys us and it destroys community. It produces: **(1) Misery** = It’s not surprising that the word for miser comes from the same word for misery. Greed also leads to distraction. The Latin word for distraction is *distractus* or torn apart - which is a perfect description for many homes in our culture: torn apart. Why? Because we must have more – more stuff, more cars, more clothes, more degrees, more awards. Greed tears us apart. It tears our family and our

community apart. It makes us miserable. In the classic example we think of Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge: "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!" (2) **Hardness of heart**, it begins with callousness towards the poor and broken. "More and more, the poor and broken-hearted are tucked away where we cannot see them." We don't see them and we don't want to see them. For instance, most of us know that there is a large underclass – from India, El Salvador, Mexico, etc. – living right under our nose, but they are largely invisible to us. Who cares? I have to get more stuff! One Christian leader from Brazil¹ said, "I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ may have been exaggerating when he warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one's eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people's hands, eyes, lips and hearts." Greed makes us miserable and it hardens our heart.

The Key to Joyful Life. By almost any statistical measure most of us here this morning are probably in the 95th percentile for wealth on this planet. So although I may not know anything about you, just like me, you're probably sunk knee-deep in greed. That's the bad news. But the good news is this: I believe that most of us don't want to be miserable and hard-hearted. We know our greed and Affluenza are making us sick. It's tearing our family apart. We ache for a joyful life. Let me say, based on the promises of God in the Bible, we don't have to live a miserable, greedy life. There is a way out of greed and into a life of joyful generosity. How do we live a joyful and generous life? Our passage hands us THE key that unlocks the door into generosity. I realize that may sound like simplistic hype, but as allowed this passage to soak into my life, I really believe that there is ONE key to a joyful and generous life. Let me give the key and then we'll explore it: ***You can overcome greed and live a joyful and generous life by knowing, trusting, enjoying and resting in the generosity of God who is for you in Jesus Christ.*** That's it. That's the key. But you can't just know like a math equation; you have to actively trust, delight, embrace, and rest in God's generous goodness for you in Jesus Christ.

In this passage there are three descriptions of a greedy giver: v5 - *grudgingly* (well, I suppose I'll give something, but I'm certainly not happy about it), v6 – *sparingly* (Well, I suppose I'll give, but don't expect too much from me), v7 – *reluctantly or under compulsion* (Well, I suppose if you twist my arm one more time, I'll open my wallet and give another 100 bucks). In sharp contrast, when God frees you from greed, your giving is: v5 – *willing*; v6 – *generous*; v7 – *cheerful* (the Greek word is *hilarion* from which we get our word hilarious). The generous person lives to give; it makes her happy; it even makes her smile and chuckle and then laugh out loud. Generosity is fun; it's hilarious!

What makes the difference between greed and generosity, misery and joy, callousness and love? Remember: we hunger for this joy and generosity. So what is the key?

The greedy heart, the grudging, sparing, pressured heart, looks at God as the Big Taker and not a Generous Giver. The Greedy person will certainly give something. Somewhere along the way he'll hear the institutional church screeching in his ears, "We need your help. So give more." So out comes the gift, but it's a grudging, sparing,

reluctant gift. The greedy person does not know or does not rest in God's generous heart. Perhaps he formed his image of God's character from an unloving, un-affirming father (Example). Perhaps he's always heard the church demand more, take more and ask more without ever pouring life back into his soul. So for whatever reason, he views God as a demanding, draining, life-sucking Taker – how could it be otherwise? As Pastor John Piper said, "If every time I look up and I see a pointing finger of God demanding, "Give me! Give me! How can I look back down on the needs of the world and (then look up to God and say), 'Take me: I will gladly spend and be spent for your good?'"

How vastly different is the generous person. Look at verse 6. There is a wonderful promise in this verse. (Show a loaf of bread). Most of us are removed from the process of food. As you know, this loaf of bread did not fall out of the sky. Somewhere, someone had to take a huge risk. Someone with a bag or a silo full of seed had to take that seed and throw it away – scatter it, relinquish control, let it go, throw it away. It's a little crazy: by subtracting from his total seed, he actually adds to his harvest and we get bread. Most of us don't want to do that with our money. *You mean I'm supposed to give it away? That's crazy! You have more by giving away less – or by just spending it on yourself or maybe your family.* But the Bible invites us – even dares us – to take God's perspective: you will have more by giving more. We throw it away; we let go of it; we release it so that it may come back to us. (Now the Bible assumes that you'll have enough common sense to pay your bills and put a roof over your head and feed your children and clothe them properly and purchase a reliable vehicle, etc. So when I say "throw it away" I don't mean that you give away 100% of what you own). That's the principle of reaping or harvesting (see also verse 10). And we do this not grudgingly, but cheerfully and joyfully and freely. See verse 7 again. Love is generous and God longs for you to be happy in your generosity. And God enjoys your enjoyment of giving.

Beneath this spirit of joy and generosity you will find a profoundly different image and enjoyment of God. The generous person sees God not as the Big Taker in the Sky but as a good, generous, loving Heavenly Father whose heart is for me in Jesus Christ. God is a Giver, Provider and Supplier. So when this person considers God he feels replenished not drained; loved not manipulated; cared for not abandoned. Even when God commands and says, "You shall not" or "You must do this," he feels God's goodness for him not against him; he rests in God's generosity rather than resisting God's miserliness.

God wants to be known as a bountiful, generous God who is for you and not against you. Paul continues this theme in verse 8 – "God is able to make all grace abound to you." All grace ... abound. Verse 11 – "You will be made rich in every way."

What kind of riches is God promising to supply for us? For example, I have a 1988 puke-green, dilapidated Volvo. Does this mean that God will delight to give me a 2005 BMW ____? Not exactly. In verse 8 we're told that God will supply all that we so that "you will abound in every good work." In verse 10 God promises to "enlarge the harvest of your righteousness." God may not give you the BMW ____, but God will give you everything you and your family need to serve and pour your life out for Him. You don't have to worry. For instance, let's say God tells you to scale down your workload so you

can give more time for service to others. Or let's say that God leads you to do something radical like actually tithe (and by the way, God assumes that most people will keep 90% for living expenses) your income to a local church that is seeking to honor Christ. You don't have to worry because God is a generous God. God will supply everything you need to serve Him.

Why does God richly and generously supply our need? So that we can hoard it and amass it and count it and spend it on ourselves? No. See verse 12. God generously pours into our life, we joyfully pour it out on others, and what happens? First, it supplies the needs of God's people. Secondly, it also overflows in praise for God. Generosity is like a party. It overflows – people praise God, people praise one another, people pray for you “because of the surpassing grace of God.” It's a wild party of giving.

Finally, Paul concludes with verse 15 – “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” Clearly, he's referring to the greatest gift ever given from the most generous heart that ever existed – the heart of God for us in Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of all giving. This is the freedom from the grip of greed. God loves a cheerful giver because God is a cheerful giver. When we know that we've been given life through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:6-11) when we didn't earn it or deserve it, when we come to faith in Christ and we are justified in Christ, we can enjoy and even rest in the truth that God is for us and no longer against us (Romans 5:1 – we are at peace with God)..

Now let me get very practical. How does this change my life? What does this mean on a weekly basis in our approach to giving and money and generosity? Let me read 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. Note a few things:

- (1) This is not unique to one church. This has relevance for all followers of Jesus.
- (2) He calls for a weekly setting aside of money for the purpose of giving to God. Our generosity should be not just a grand sentiment but a weekly act. Your very first act of worship with God begins when you write a check. Does that sound unspiritual and heavy-handed? It depends on your view of God. If God is actively supplying your needs, then week by week you have a decision to make: God has poured out to me, so I will respond by pouring back by setting aside a specific amount on a weekly basis. God wants me to know the joy of a generous life – not just once in a lifetime or once in a while, but at least once a week.

So the key to a joyful and generous life is this: How does God view you this morning? Is he for you or against you? Is God generous or stingy? Does God want to bless you or play games with you, maybe even destroy you? Is God a Father and a Fountain that flows with grace? Or is God a giant vacuum who only wants to suck life out of you? If you see God as a Taker, then you must grab all the pleasures you can. I have to get, keep and hoard all that I can.

How do we change our image of God as a Giver and not a Taker? How do I trust that God is for me in Christ Jesus? We've been implying a number of things, but allow me to give you four specific ways you can heal your image of God as a generous Giver:

- **Read and claim His promises for you.** Followers of Jesus believe that God has written his promises for you in a book – called the Bible. And in His word God has left you wonderful words of comfort and love. In the Old Testament God says, “Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters ... Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me: hear me that your soul may live” (Isaiah 55:1-3). And then Jesus Himself promised, “Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). These are God’s promises to you. Read them, receive them, savor them.
- **Focus on the Cross.** God has not only given His word, He also demonstrated His love. Reflecting back on everything that Jesus did for us, the Apostle Paul declared, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His only Son, but freely delivered him for us all, how will he not also freely give us all things” (Romans 8:31-32).
- **Open yourself to the Holy Spirit.** Romans 8:16 – not just intellectual facts but an inner experience: the Spirit of God speaks to my spirit and says, “You are loved.”
- **Fellowship with other followers of Jesus.**
- **Come to the Lord’s Table.**

¹ Dom Helder Camara, a 20th century Catholic archbishop of Brazil.