

The Overflowing Life – Part 4

Giving: Unleashing Generosity

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

February 19, 2006

If you're new to TVC, I usually begin my messages with a funny, heartwarming story. But this morning I'm going to share some not-so-funny, rather dreary statistics about money. As a national average, only one-third of church members actually support their local church.¹ In 1916 most Christians were giving 2.9% of their income to their churches. In 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, it rose to 3.3%. Three years ago (2002), when Americans were 480% wealthier (and that's after taxes and inflation), our giving to our church family dropped to 2.6%.² As a group, American churchgoers spend \$2.5 billion per year on sharing Christ's love around the globe. That sounds impressive until you hear that we also spend the same amount on chewing gum, three times that amount on movies and 15 times that amount on gambling.³

Apparently, most of us do have a money problem. It's not that we can't make enough; we need some help giving it away. And, secondly, we don't like talking about this problem. So at this point, you might be thinking, *here we go: another negative, high-pressure, guilt-laden, religious harangue about money. That's on my top ten list of "things I don't like about church."* Besides, money is a private matter. *It's none of your business what I give or who I give to.*"

Up until about a year ago I would have completely agreed with you. For many years, this topic made me feel much more uncomfortable than you. But here's one of the reasons why I love the Bible: it's so refreshingly honest. This passage is all about money and giving, but it doesn't hide or ignore anything. It lays it all on the table. And as we'll see in this passage, it deals with money in a remarkably positive and spiritual fashion. And I'm not exaggerating to say, that if we understand and practice what this passage says about money, it will revolutionize our lives, causing a beautiful and creative overflow of God's grace through us into our church, community and world.

A little background to this text: 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus a number of house churches (they met in homes because they did not own church buildings) sprouted across the Middle East and parts of Asia. They were racially and culturally diverse but they were all centered in their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. In the early 50's a famine struck Jerusalem and the churches in that area were struggling to make ends meet. So the Apostle Paul, the man who had organized these house churches, sent out an appeal to the churches throughout the region to give money and help these hurting brothers and sisters. The letter that we just heard was addressed to one of those churches – the house church in the city of Corinth. When they heard about the need, they

¹ Source: The Christian and Missionary Alliance Church

² Source: www.emptytomb.org

³ Source: John and Sylvia Ronsvalle, **Beyond the Stained Glass Window**.

said, “Of course we’ll give generously to the need.” So whenever Paul traveled, he touted those wonderful, generous believers in Corinth. But we know what happens: we see a need (the church finances, Katrina, an earthquake, a famine in Africa) and our heart melts with compassion, but then the need and our enthusiasm begin to fade and we never write the check or put the cash in the plate. Our good intentions fade. That’s what happened with the church in Corinth. Now word has come back to Paul that they aren’t following through, and as you might expect, the church in Corinth would rather not deal with it. They’re embarrassed. But Paul brings the issues into the open – and he deals with it so honestly, gently, constructively and even joyfully.

In our Bibles he devotes two entire chapters to this issue. I encourage you to read both chapters because they’re filled with practical, commonsense advice about how we should handle our finances. For instance, look with me at chapter 8:13 – “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.” I love that! As I said three weeks ago, in our day, Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, might say, “Don’t give away so much money that you can’t feed your family or pay your bills. That would make you hard pressed. The goal is equality.” Notice also chapter 8:20-22. Paul and his leadership team set up a committee of three to oversee and administer the funds they were collecting. And then note what he says, “We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.” That’s just good, honest, clear financial accountability. Do you see how the God of the Bible cares for all of life – not just what we label the “spiritual” part of life, but what we label the “practical.” God cares about creating structures that promote financial integrity and propriety. I love that about God. Our whole life – everything we do all week long – matters to God.

You see, although it’s a touchy, private issue – an issue that could divide Paul and his friends in Corinth – Paul isn’t a bit embarrassed. He brings up the money-issue with candor and even joy. Did you notice the joy in this passage? This isn’t a negative, arm-twisting, unhappy harangue about give until it hurts, give because the church needs it, give because God demands it. This passage overflows with images of happiness, abundance, overflow and even laughter.

Where does this sense of joy and abundance come from? For many of us joy and abundance and overflow haven’t been part of our experience with religion or church or God. The key is found in our relationship with God. Is it based on “religion,” the human striving to please God, impress others and be good enough in our own performance with our own resources? Or is our relationship with God based on the Gospel of God’s grace, the incredible good news that God has come in Christ to set us free from the failure of our religious systems? Is our relationship with God based on Christ who lived the life we should have lived, died the death we should have died, loved us more than we could ever hope to imagine and now, by calling out to Him, we have become forgiven and ushered into a whole new creation with the risen Christ who is at work in and through us?

These two chapters are laced with the Gospel of grace. It starts in 8:1. We see a vivid and beautiful picture of it in 8:9. Now in chapter 9 we hear how the Gospel of grace, the Gospel of faith in Christ, works itself out in the financial sphere of our lives. Read 9:5-7. Did you notice the description of two ways of giving? These verses list how not to give: (Verse 5) Not grudgingly; (verse 6) Not sparingly; (verse 7) Not reluctantly. This describes someone who gives but he or she feels pressured, harried, manipulated, nervous, fearful and perhaps even angry. They may bring out the checkbook or drop the cash in the plate, but underneath the bodily actions there is always a pool of resentment. And for these grumpy givers giving is always a negative and unhappy experience.

Of course there is another way to give our money away. Notice the description of givers who give (verse 5) willingly; (verse 6) bountifully and (verse 7) cheerfully. These givers literally overflow with generosity. I call them “deliriously messy givers” because the overflow of happy grace splashes on people all around them. Wherever they go, they leave a trail or a legacy of grace and gracefulness. They change people (see verse 12).

Now what makes the difference between these two kinds of givers?⁴ The grudging, sparing, reluctant givers – who also feel pressured, nervous and resentful – are following the way of religiosity. They don’t view God through the grace of Jesus Christ and thus they see God as a Taker or a potential Taker. God is always asking, demanding, taking and He never gets enough from us. As someone (John Piper) has said, “If my life is being drained away because God is so incessantly and solely demanding, if every time I look up and see the pointing finger of God demanding, “Give me! Give me!” how can I look down on the needs of the world and say, “Take me: I will gladly (give with sacrificial generosity).” In this view, God never stops demanding and one of God’s demands is, “Give more to the church!” And we live like orphans who are thrown back on our own resources to meet God’s demands.

How different is the second kind of giver! The willing, bountiful, and cheerful giver’s heart is secure in God’s grace, overflowing with God’s grace. God is a generous Father who really cares for His children. They don’t live like orphans; they live like children of a very wealthy and generous Father. Even when this giver hears a command from God, from the depths of her heart she knows that (1) God’s heart is good towards her and (2) she is never thrown back on her own resources; she is never an orphan; she is never left alone; she is loved beyond all reason and cared for beyond all knowledge.

So the issue facing us this morning is this: How do you see God? Do you believe and live the Gospel? Do you see yourself as a reclaimed child of God – or do you live more like an orphan? Well, now Paul will say, let me tell you how God’s children live; let me tell you how Gospel-centered people live. They overflow with grace. And one of the ways they overflow is with their giving, that is, their financial generosity.

That’s what’s behind all the images in these passages. Notice verse 6 again – “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows

⁴ The thrust of this idea is found in a sermon by John Piper called “He Who Sows Bountifully Will Reap Bountifully” dated March 20, 1988 available on www.desiringGod.org.

generously will also reap generously.” It’s an agricultural image; unfortunately, I doubt that most of you have a lot of farming experience. I lived in the dairy farming country of northeastern Minnesota for eight years and even helped Kenny Duesler and Willis Finifrock gather in the August hay crop. (I was a pathetic farmer – and everyone in the church knew it – but they kept loving me and I just kept loving them). But anyone can understand the basic principle of God’s financial mathematics. You see, God’s math goes like this: you add by subtracting. You get a greater sum by taking away from your total. That’s God’s math – to which you might say, “God is crazy!” And the Gospel says, “Yes, God is crazy – crazily filled with grace and goodness, that is.” Because God’s grace works like this: imagine a farmer with a bag of seed. It’s all he has so, naturally, he wants to hold on to it. But God says, “Don’t hold on to it, don’t play it safe; let it go, spread it around.” So the farmer relinquishes his tight grip on his bag of seed, throwing his seed far and wide. He gives up control of the seed. Yes, he must keep some of the seed to feed his family and his animals (remember the principle from 2 Corinthians 8:13); but the more he sows, the more he throws away, the larger his crop will be at harvest time. It’s the law of God’s harvest; it’s the way God does financial planning.

You will have more if you give more. We see this principle at work in other areas of life as well. If you invest time and love and encouragement into a relationship – your marriage, a friendship, your small group, your children – that relationship will usually (unfortunately people aren’t as reliable as wheat or soybeans) produce a larger crop of love back to you. That’s God’s math. You get a larger sum by subtracting. You have more when you give more. But, once again, this all depends on a certain view of God, the God of grace that we see in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Otherwise this is just a bunch of wishful, magical daydreaming.

Now notice that this practice of having more by giving more frees us from religious pressure and leads us into joy. “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” Paul actually quotes from the Old Testament here (as he does at least five times in this chapter – I hope we can see how deeply Jewish the New Testament is) to say that God does not want us to give grudgingly (see Deuteronomy 15:7-11). The Greek word that Paul used for cheerful is the word *hilarion*. This is really strange. Religion is serious and somber, but here the Bible tells us that one of the most mundane and boring parts of a worship service is actually downright hilarious. Now if we’re still stuck in religiosity, if we don’t understand the Gospel of grace, we’ll say, “Ugh, not only do I have to give, but I have to enjoy it too? This will push me over the edge.” But the grace-filled person knows that God is like a Father who wants to see His children enjoying generosity. God enjoys your enjoyment of generous giving.

And then the grace-filled person waits eagerly to receive God’s grace. That’s the point behind verse 8 – “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” The original Greek words that Paul used as he wrote this passage contain words with the same stems (the literary technique is called paronomasia) so it sounds like this *Pasan ... panit pantole pasan ... pan*. He’s playing around with word sounds like a dolphin plays around in the

ocean. Giving is so much fun that he can't write about it without having fun. Of course the point of his playing around is God's abundance. "And God is able..." That's where it all begins - God's power and ability. God is more than able to give us whatever we need to be generous. Again, God is the ultimate, most generous Giver in the universe. "And God is able to make *all* grace abound to you, so that in *all* things and at *all* times, having *all* that you need, you will abound in *every* good work." Because God abounds (or overflows) with grace, God gives us all we need so that we, like our heavenly Father, can abound in good works. God is the Giver. This makes us content and secure in God's love. We can look to our heavenly Father and say, "I have all that I need. You are my provider."

We don't always live that way, do we? A few months ago Julie and I were taking our loyal dog Dwight for a walk along Quaker Path. To our surprise and delight, Julie spotted a \$5 bill along the roadside. Then we spotted another \$5 and a \$1 bill and another \$1. Unfortunately, rather than say, "Thank you for your abounding grace that's always around us" I joined Dwight in scrounging through the bushes looking for more money. I was living like an orphan, not like a child of my Heavenly Father.

The assumption behind this whole passage is that God doesn't just take away; God always gives back – way more than you and I could ever imagine. Paul hammers it home again and again. Look at verses 10-11. Notice the key words: supply, increase, enlarge, made rich. God seems to be saying, "Try me on this. I dare you to put me to the test. Let your money go and live generously. Don't just have good intentions; order and discipline your life in such a way that you really put your money where your mouth is. Write the check. Give consistently and diligently. And then watch me go to work. On the front end, I will supply what you need to give generously and then on the back end I will increase, enlarge and make rich."

Now does that mean if I give God \$100, God will quickly give me \$200 back? Not at all. Listen to the story from a young woman in our church family.

One year I received a surprise gift for \$50. (In my mind), I had the money spent before it even hit my wallet. But we had learned two days earlier of a family in need (and) my husband subtly mentioned that maybe we should give that money to them. Agh! Why did he have to say that? I wanted the money. I even tried to argue that we had already (given to the church). But God (told) me that if I wanted that \$50 so much – so much more than I wanted God at that moment – then it was the last thing I should hold on to. So we gave it away. I'll never forget the mix of frustration and relief. To this day, I am so thankful I obeyed God. I'd love to say that God replaced the \$50 the very next day. But now I see that our math isn't God's math. If we get locked into an equation when it comes to giving, we'll miss so many gifts the Lord gives to us in return. I could write a list a mile long of all the gifts God has sent my way since giving away that \$50, but none of them came in the form of a \$50 bill. Honestly, they were all much bigger and better!

That's the point behind verse 12. "This service (that's a term for worshipping God) that you perform is not only meeting the needs of God's people but it is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." And then in verse 14 he said, "And in their prayers

for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.” Do you see what happens when Christ’s followers are generous? There is an overflow. It meets needs but it goes way beyond that. People meet God, children grow spiritually, adults are equipped for service, people are connected with community, Dr. Joe Harvey builds a clinic in the middle of Africa, and our youth find Jesus and grow in Him. There is joy in seeing God change hearts and lives. It’s so joyful that Paul concludes by almost shouting in verse 15, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” The word indescribable does not appear anywhere in the Bible or in Greek culture so most people think Paul made up a crazy new word like “incrediblicious.” Again, he’s just having fun with giving and telling other people to enjoy giving.

Now what kind of relationship with God do you have? Are you walking in the way of religion? If so, I have good news for you: God has a better plan. It’s a harder plan because we have to come to the end of our pride and our performance. It’s harder because we have to come to God like the worst sinners in the world: solely based on our faith in Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose again for us. But when we come to Him we are set free forever – free from condemnation, free from guilt, free from fear, free from pride, free from a cold heart, free from snobbery and elitism, free from shame, free from sin’s grip, free from hiding, free to love and free to dance. The choice is so clear: the way of religion or the way of the cross. Your way or the way Jesus offers. Which will you choose today?

If you’ve chosen the way of Jesus, how is your giving life? Do you give from pressure? Is your giving laced with resentment or control? Is your giving grudging or conditional – i.e. I will give if I get what I want. Is your giving tinged with fear and sadness? You don’t have God’s perspective on giving. Allow the Gospel of Jesus to shape your giving. Ponder God’s math: the more you give away the more you get back.

That’s grace-filled giving and once you get it in your system it tastes incrediblicious!