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Extravagant Generosity

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

We have been talking in worship about the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations and the fifth is **Extravagant Generosity**. I can imagine some different responses to that phrase. *“Extravagant generosity? The economy stinks. My net worth has shrunk, I don’t have discretionary income. I can’t pay all my bills, I am looking for work. Extravagant generosity, you’ve got to be kidding.”*

Virtually everyone has less financially than a couple of years ago; some people are frightened, scared, and worried. I understand that. However, one thing I have learned throughout my life though is that **generosity has much more to do with a person’s heart and values than what is in his or her bank account.**

The Apostle Paul likely wrote the first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians from Macedonia. The Macedonians were dirt poor. They lived in what is now northern Greece – barren land with few opportunities for trade and industry. However, Paul took an offering *from them* for those in need at Jerusalem, and this is part of what he said about it to the church in Corinth:

“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 (or benevolence) 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!”

The first thing we need to know about extravagant generosity is that God is extravagantly generous. Think about it. God could have created a purely functional universe. The only plants would be ones that animals and humans need to eat. There wouldn't be any need for flowers for example. Roses and hydrangeas are examples of God's extravagant generosity. They are totally unnecessary – their beauty is an extravagantly generous gift. All the birds migrating south stopping by on Cape Cod to rest and feed could all have looked alike, but they are beautifully diverse in color and size. There is no greater example of the Creator's generosity than the gift of Jesus Christ. God has given us the most extravagantly generous gift – that of the Son who lived, died, and rose again for our sake. God is hoping we will be extravagantly generous in giving of our love, time, and resources, just as the Lord has been with us.

Mary read for us the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11.

“But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ² with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ “Ananias,” Peter asked, “*why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?* ⁴ *While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!*”⁵ Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter said to her, “*Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.*” And she said, “*Yes, that was the price.*”⁹ Then Peter said to her, “*How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.*”¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.”

Talk about a bad day at church! This is kind of tough story to our ears. They didn't give enough in the offering and Peter bumps them off – okay, not quite, but it almost appears that way. It sounds like bringing an offering to the Godfather. “*Ananias, Ananias, what have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?*” There are

some important truths in this story we can miss because it is so dramatic. Here are three:

When I keep what I am at liberty to give, part of me dies.

When I give what culture says I am entitled to keep, then that is freeing.

Extravagant Generosity is more about what I am keeping than what I am giving

away. The great 16th-Century Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, once said: "There are three conversions necessary in the Christian life: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse." Sometimes the third can be the most difficult! Just ask Ananias and Saphira.

For the follower of Jesus, every decision involving money is spiritual before it is financial. **God has blessed us for one reason so that we can be generous for God's sake.** As followers of Jesus who practice extravagant generosity we don't want money ruling our life; we want our spiritual life ruling our money. We Use money without Serving money, We Own without Treasuring, we Possess without being Possessed. Whether we are rich or poor, as followers of Jesus it is important for us to be capable of having or not having money and possessions without being possessed or corrupted by them. If we have money or an abundance of things we need not love them, trust them or serve them. Whatever our financial situation we are to use money and possessions in ways that honor God and encourage others – not in ways that are self-indulgent, self destructive or harmful to others. The Bible teaches us that money is not merely a means of exchange. Money is like a god - it offers security, it can induce guilt, give freedom and power, and it entices us. Like a god, money is out to gain our allegiance and our devotion. When we let go of money, we let go of part of ourselves, and part of our security. This is scary and which is precisely why we need to do it. Giving to God and to others frees us from the tyranny of money. That is one reason we encourage people to tithe, to give at least 10% of what God has blessed us with to the Lord's work. The reality is that most Christians in America give less than 4% of what they earn to the Lord's work. Think of all the transforming ministry that could take place in the United States and around the world if every believer was moving toward tithing 1% at a time one year at a time.

Two men were shipwrecked on a remote island in the Pacific.

One began screaming in anguish, *"We're going to die! There's no food! There's no water! We're going to die!"*

"Relax," the second man said.

"I make \$100,000 a month, and I tithe 10% of that to my church. My pastor will find me."
I would too.

A Christian virtue involving money that until our current economic reality seemed quaint to many people is frugality. Not any more. Twenty years ago, Christian author Dallas Willard noted, ***"In frugality we abstain from using money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury. The spiritually wise person has always known that frivolous consumption corrupts the soul away from trust in, worship of, and service to God and injures our neighbors as well. In our current world, a large part of the freedom that comes from frugality is freedom from the spiritual bondage caused by financial debt."***¹

Frugality is a virtue that enables us to be generous. In our church, when it comes to money and finances, we have people at every point on the financial spectrum: from those who are very well off to those who struggle to make their bills, to those who are saddled with debt. We are also a spiritual family and we seek to help each other. In chapters 8 and 9 of Paul's Second Letter to the Christians in Corinth, he is working to gather from his predominantly Gentile-Christian churches an offering for the impoverished Jewish-Christian congregation in Jerusalem, whose members are so different from Greeks in ethnicity, culture, and economic class. Paul tells his churches that we followers of Jesus are to live not only for ourselves but also for others; that we are to live not as isolated individuals but as a community whose concern for one another transcends all ethnic, political, economic, and cultural boundaries. So we followers of Jesus are to give generously and cheerfully both of our money and of our time and talent so that others may receive according to their need and give thanks to God. It feels good to be able to be generous and give money and things away to help others and honor God. It hurts not to be able to. Sometimes we are on the giving side, at another time we may find ourselves on the receiving end. Paul says no matter what 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. In Acts we learn of Barnabas and others who sold land and gave the proceeds to the apostles for the ministry of the church. There are countless people through the centuries who trusted God and used money, position, and power to the glory of God and for the good of others and by doing so they grew closer to God.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (Harper: San Francisco, 1988), 168-169.

Ultimately how we handle our money and our life hinges on where we place our trust. A young woman brought her fiancé home to meet her parents. After dinner, her mother tells her father to find out more about the young man, The father invites the fiancé into his study.

“So what are your plans?” the father asks the young man.

“I am a Bible scholar,” he replies.

“A Bible scholar. Hmm,” the father says. *“Admirable, but how will you buy our daughter a beautiful engagement ring such as she deserves?”*

“I will study,” the young man replies, *“and God will provide for us.”*

“And how will you provide a nice house for my daughter to live in as she’s accustomed to?” asks the father.

“I will concentrate on my studies,” the young man replies, *“and God will provide for us.”*

“And children?” asks the father. *“How will you support children?”*

“Don’t worry, sir, God will provide,” replies the fiancé.

The conversation proceeds like this, and each time the father questions, the young man insists that God will provide.

Later the mother asks, *“How did it go, honey?”*

The father answers,

“He has no job and no plans, but the good news is he thinks I’m God!”

When we consider our money and our life where are we putting our trust? Whatever our financial situation we are to use money and possessions in ways that honor God and encourage others.

When you attend worship at any church and look at the church’s bulletin or program it gives some insight into what the church is like. Looking at ours today, it is filled with items related to the Holiday Fair and last week and this week we’ve heard from Larry Marsland of the Lower Cape Outreach Council and Cathy Driscoll from Hands of Hope. Everyone working on the fair is doing so knowing that her or his efforts will help these organizations assist people with food, clothing, and staying in their homes. This is something everyone can feel good about.

In the bulletin you can also see the notice about Sean Martin and Donna Potter’s situation on the blue insert. They have gone from the joy and excitement of being married in July to all the emotions and challenges brought about by a horrific car accident in August that has left Sean with a spinal cord injury, causing paralysis from the chest down. The first priority is making their home handicap accessible as quickly as

possible as Sean will be discharged in several weeks. Many people have stepped forward to help in a variety of ways. We are facing a situation not unlike what we read about in the Book of Acts where it says (Acts 2:43-47), “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.”⁴⁴ **All who believed were together and had all things in common;**⁴⁵ **they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds^j to all, as any had need.**⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home^k and ate their food with glad and generous^l hearts,⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

You can hear the five practices in that passage – there is hospitality, worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. One of the greatest signs and wonders of the early church was the extravagant generosity of the people – it was no wonder that day by day the Lord added to their numbers. It is a tremendous sign to the world when the church truly bears witness to the extravagant generosity and love of God. So given the extraordinary circumstance facing Sean and Donna, this is what we are going to try to do. The cost of making their home accessible is going to be in the vicinity of \$38,000. We have a challenge gift that will match the first \$19,000 that is contributed. Since we have already received almost \$5,500 dollars, we are already off to a good start. We are trusting the Lord in this – there is a critical need in our church family that we have the opportunity to meet. I believe we can do it.

As I close I want to note that we can be extravagantly generous with more than just money. With our time, our love, our skills, our wisdom, experience, energy, strength, prayers, but we also need to be with whatever financial resources God has blessed us to earn or to manage for a little while. Fortune 500 companies flourish and fail – so many of them are like the leaves on the trees. Here today. Gone tomorrow. What we extravagantly generously give away for the sake of Jesus and helping others never decreases in value; it simply keeps rippling out in its influence.

Prayer – A Litany of Generosity (By Joyce Rupp)

*Response to each: ***Gracious God, give us generous hearts.***

^j Gk *them*

^k Or *from house to house*

^l Or *sincere*

Extravagantly generous God give us generous hearts to share whatever gift it is that you have given to us.

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To acknowledge you as the giver of all good gifts...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To give without counting the cost...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To share without expecting something in return...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To be wise in the way of caring for ourselves and others...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To hold all of our treasures and values with open hands...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To have gospel priorities and to align our life, love and time in their light...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To be gracious and unbegrudging in our giving...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To recognize the abundance of blessings in each passing day...

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To know the freedom that comes with true extravagant generosity.

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

To fall more deeply in love with the God of all generosity so that our hearts are strong enough to give away freely whatever is asked.

Gracious God, give us generous hearts.

Loving God, who so generously lavishes our lives with goodness, create in our hearts a deep center of gratitude, a center that grows so strong in its thanksgiving that sharing freely of our treasures becomes the norm and the pattern of our existence. Remind us often of how much you cherish us, of how abundantly you have offered gifts to us, especially in the hours of our greatest need. May we always be grateful for your reaching into our lives with surprises of joy, growth, and unearned love. Amen.