

# The Joy of Generosity

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 14 March 2021

Preacher: Simon Attwood

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. It's great to be here with you this morning, even though you are far away in your homes. Let me add my welcome to Jack and Martin.

My name is Simon, I'm the trainee minister here. And so let me pray as we dig into God's word this morning. Father, we thank you that you are the one who has given us everything.

From the breath in our lungs to the food on our plates. So as we talk today about giving and generosity, help us to see you more clearly. To become people who are more like you in our attitude.

And this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, you'll have picked up that it is our annual Giving Sunday. Once a year we spend some extra time focusing in on how we give.

This allows us to be thankful and express that together. And to look at how God uses that in the life of our church. Now, thankfully, we are actually staying in the same book that we're in the series in this time.

[ 1 : 03 ] So we're in 2 Corinthians 9. Now, chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians come just before what we're preaching on currently. It's Paul's middle section addressing a significant act of giving on behalf of a load of churches towards the struggling church in Jerusalem.

So although we're not in the same situation as they are, there's a real sense that we've got a lot to learn from these churches' attitude to giving and how Paul teaches them.

What Paul sets down in these chapters is essential for us getting our mindset right. Because money can so often be something that feels like a controlling factor in our lives.

Something just laced with anxiety that we struggle to talk about. And what Paul wants us to see is that when we get our minds right on giving, it can be one of the most joyful things in our faith.

It's no small task, then, to change the minds of people like us about parting with our cash. But let's see how Paul does it. Now, I think there are two overarching ideas Paul is going to give us today.

[ 2 : 09 ] Two things that he wants the Corinthians to understand. Two things for us to be more clear on in our relationship with money. So the first is that giving enriches the giver.

And the second is that giving brings glory to God. So that first part, then, giving enriches the giver.

Now, I wonder if you're honest, what is your first emotion when you think about giving?

Is it joy or guilt? Excitement or dread? Why does giving Sunday sometimes feel like the awkward spike in the church calendar?

Doesn't it seem odd that talking about generosity can just make us feel so tense? Maybe that's because we fear that, actually, if we really take this seriously, we're going to lose out.

Then maybe I'll have to get rid of the stuff that I like. Maybe it's because we know it's something that we can easily get wrong that we look at our history of how we've used money and think, actually, I don't always get this right at all.

[ 3 : 13 ] But what if we really believe that giving really enriched the giver? That generosity was actually one of God's big gifts to us? Well, let's look at four principles in this passage that I think help us work that out.

We're going to focus in our first point on verses 6 to 11 of chapter 9 to look at our giving. So our first principle then, give generously. Now, I think verse 6 sometimes causes evangelicals to have a mild panic attack.

It seems to say, well, you get what you give. You put in more, you get more out. Now, the reason that might panic some of us is because that idea and that thought has been so misused in the past and today in the present.

There is a movement called the Prosperity Gospel that basically says, if you give money to the church, you're planting a seed. And when that harvest comes, God will give money back to you. It's

a movement that's caused huge damage in America and in much of the developing world. The problem is that with rightly rejecting that movement, we might actually be losing something from this passage, maybe missing out on some of the joy of giving that Paul talks about.

[ 4 : 28 ] There is a reciprocal relationship between what we give in our generosity and what we receive. Paul says it in verse 6, Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.

Whoever sows generously will also reap generously. You give generously, you receive generously, says Paul. So if you want a thin, cold, anemic, ultimately miserable Christian faith, says Paul, then, well, give nothing.

If you never give anything, you'll never receive. Why? Well, because you're treating God as if he is a heavenly miser who just loves withholding good things from you.

The kind of God that thinks that cold porridge is just about the best meal in the whole world. And that God will never inspire you to give anything. But if we know that our God is the giver of all good gifts, that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, and that there's nothing in your entire life that you have that isn't a gracious gift that he has given you, well, then you know a generous provider. You know a gracious Father who has given you all things. So when we think about reforming our view on giving, some of the awkwardness we feel in that, really it's a battle for our own hearts, how we view God and what we think that he is like.

[ 5 : 56 ] The way we view our giving and generosity is totally bound up in who we believe God to be. So to really enjoy the Christian life, says Paul, we must give generously.

But then our second principle, we give from the heart. That connection between our giving and our view of God means that we must test our hearts when we come to give.

Now, one of the strange upsides of the lockdown, and I'm sure some of you have found some of these, is that you get to walk down Buchanan Street and nobody bothers you. It's just so exciting. You're not even remotely badgered by charity collectors. Now, I say that with no offense to the people who are doing that collection. They are friendly and they're often doing it for excellent causes.

But we've all done the kind of determined accelerate to get past them, haven't we? We've all had that awkward moment of just not wanting to be bothered. Why is it so painful and awkward for us to do that?

[ 6 : 59 ] Well, I think because we all fear having our giving compelled, feeling like someone's twisting our arm and pressuring us into giving. Manipulation just feels unpleasant, obviously.

That feeling that there's something in my heart that says I should give, but maybe I don't want to. It's just really awkward. Well, look what Paul says to the Corinthians. It isn't the amount, but the heart that they give with.

Look down at verse 7. What really matters in this collection is two things. Number one, to decide in advance what to do. Paul says in verse 7, each of you should give what you've decided to give in your heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion.

Paul says we've got to give with our brains switched on. It's not just something that you panically kind of throw a tenor at. This is something you have to decide to do. There's got to be a decision that comes from your heart.

So for us, that just clearly means we have to decide how much we're going to give and what we're going to give before we give it. I mean, obviously that then means that when a need comes up or when someone asks us to give to something that is right and good, we can cheerfully go, actually, yes, I'm ready to do that because I have decided to already.

[ 8 : 20 ] The end of that verse is famous. God loves a cheerful giver. Because when we think about our giving in advance, when we do it prayerfully and carefully, we can do it joyfully.

It stops being something about which we worry or panic or feel anxiety, but something in which we can take real joy. And then in answer to the question, well, how much that inevitably comes up, I think C.S. Lewis expresses this really helpfully in one of his books.

He says this, because our charitable expenditure excludes them.

We shouldn't expect to have exactly the same lifestyle as the rest of our secular culture aspires to, even if it is within our means, because we are generously deciding to give things away.

There is nobody listening to this sermon this morning who couldn't give. Let me say personally to some of you who are students, living on student loans, that doesn't mean you cannot give.

[ 9 : 49 ] But it's not about the amount. It's about the heart that you give with. We give generously and we give from the heart. Now, third, Paul says we give with purpose.

Look down at verses 8 and 9. And Paul reminds us that God has given direction to our giving. God provides for us to do all that we need to do in work for him.

His provision is for his kingdom, ultimately. Verse 8 says, Abound in good work for him. God provides for us that we might enjoy doing the work that he has given us to do.

And that's just one of the major reasons that prosperity gospel falls down. Because it's just so self-focused to say, Well, you give so that you can receive purely for yourself. By comparison, Paul's attitude is outward-focused generosity.

And it's clearly not just material wealth. It's not less than that, but it isn't just that. In the last chapter, chapter 8, in verse 9 of that, Paul said this.

[ 10 : 57 ] 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 through his poverty might become rich.

When you look at what Christ has done for us, it gives you no sense of self-focused giving, does it? If Christ had stayed self-focused, he never would have gone to the cross, and we would have no redemption.

Yet he gave himself for others out of obedience to the Father. And as he has abundantly provided for us, so we know that we are provided for, and therefore we can go out and give ourselves for the sake of others.

And some of the joy of this is bound up in chapter 9, verse 9, where Paul quotes from Psalm 112. It's a psalm all about those who have been blessed by the Lord, so that the Lord enables them to continue to give out more.

And to quote just a couple of other verses from that psalm, it says this. Blessed are those who fear the Lord and find great delight in his commands. Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever.

[ 12 : 11 ] Good will come to those who are generous and lend freely, who conduct their affairs with justice. They will have no fear of bad news. Their hearts are steadfast, trusting the Lord.

You see, those who have learned the grace of giving understand the purpose of it, to enjoy the benefits that God has given with confidence and security and enduring righteousness in God. God provides gifts for us to build his kingdom, not to be hoarded as earthly treasure now. Those who freely give what they have to the poor have righteousness that endures forever, because they ultimately look like the God they say they believe in.

They are also generous givers. So giving must be purposeful. It makes us free and no longer enslaved, looking to wealth for our security, but trusting that the Lord who has provided everything for us isn't going to stop providing now or actually ever in eternity.

He is a generous and gracious giver. He's provided everything that we receive. So we use the gifts that we receive with purpose.

[ 13 : 28 ] So our first three things there have been we give generously from the heart and with purpose. And finally, we give expecting growth. I think we can really struggle with that question of giving for the sake of receiving.

It just feels kind of wrong to us. Someone says that surely if we receive by grace, then we give expecting nothing in return. And there is something right in that, but also something missing. Yes, it's true that we're called to receive and not expect to receive in return. And we give with that kind of attitude of being ready to give it away. But actually, Paul says we do grow because of it. It isn't that we give material that expecting material gain, but that when we give, when we are generous, we believe that God will grow us through that as we are obedient to him. See verses 10 and 11 are a passage.

It's not something that Paul's shy about. He says, the one who supplies all our needs will enlarge the harvest of our righteousness. And verse 11, we'll be enriched in every way. When we give, we shouldn't do so expecting material return, but we should expect that learning generosity will grow us spiritually.

[ 14 : 41 ] God provides for our generosity in a way that brings about righteousness and thankfulness. So in the end, it's a joyful thing. I think you could probably sum up this entire section, this generosity enriches the giver bit of our passage by saying that God is not a vending machine.

So don't treat him like one. The Christian life is not the one where you put in the right money and give the right prayers so you can get what you want out of God. Because let's face it, when you don't get what you want, you just get angry at him.

He's not agreed to the transaction that you set up. But that's what it is, isn't it? When we act like that, just a transaction. Reducing the glorious, generous Father to a mere mechanism.

A poor robot. A blessing vending machine. In the heart of that is the very nature of idolatry. To turn God into something that serves us.

That is under our control. That just does the blessings that we ask him to do. Now thankfully God is not like that. Because you know what you can't do with a vending machine unless you're incredibly strange?

[15:50] You can't relate to it. Treating God transactionally is nothing like the relational reality we have in following the Lord Jesus. Without him, we could guarantee that our faith would feel cold and functional.

But if we learn by being joyfully generous, we can trust that God will grow us to be more like his son. And as we become more and more like our gracious Father in Christ, we become more and more gladly generous.

What might that look like for us today? Well, of course, most obviously, giving money to the church and ministry and to Christian charities is absolutely a wonderful way of doing that.

But it extends way past that as well. It extends to our generosity and our hospitality and the way we use our homes. It extends to how we use our time, our cars, our weekends, everything.

So I wonder, what would it be like for you to take the next step in this? Maybe try and think of one thing that God has given you, something that he has blessed you with, that you could give away or maybe use for the good of somebody else.

[17:04] Doing so is an invitation to know God better. It's an invitation to joy, according to Paul. Generosity enriches the giver, so we give generously, from the heart, with purpose, and expect growth.

Now, I hope you're excited about this. I really am. I got really excited in putting this passage together and this sermon together because it's just such a wonderful thing to have our minds changed about something like this.

I know that when I was a student, I really struggled with thinking, oh, how should I give? How much should I give? And it just felt very tense. But to have a passage that just refreshes me and makes me think, actually, this is an opportunity to know God better, well, it's a great thing.

I hope that if you're in a growth group in our church and have been going through the generosity project, that it's been really encouraging to just think through this more. Ultimately, giving is part of our worship as a church, another facet of our whole lives devoted to God.

And so, secondly, and much shorter than our first point, our second point is that giving brings glory to God. In 2 Corinthians, the collection of money is being taken to aid the Jerusalem church.

[18:21] But this collection is something that has grown and challenged and enlivened many churches in the area in which Paul has done his ministry. You should take some time after this service to go back and look at chapters 8 and 9 and just see the witness of the Macedonian church.

They are some of the best givers and some of the most joyful Christians that Paul knows. The outcome of this giving, then, is glory to God, expressed in thankfulness through his people.

As we see in verses 12 to 15, this thankfulness just spirals out of a generous church. So look at verse 12. The money was collected to meet a real and desperate need, which they provided for, which is wonderful.

But the outcomes go far beyond meeting that need. Yes, there was financial provision, but out of that, there was collateral thankfulness everywhere.

Paul says there is thankfulness in supplying the need, but then verse 13, in observing proof of the Corinthians' integrity and obedience, 14, because people see God's grace in his generosity, and there's just thankfulness everywhere.

[19:35] By the time we get to verse 15, Paul's almost out of breath just praising God for the situation, saying the whole thing is an indescribable gift. He's explosively thankful. Is that how we feel about giving?

I wish it was. Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing? Now, I don't know when the last time you saw someone do something for God that just makes your heart skip a beat.

I recently had the privilege of taking part in a Christian Union events week at a university in the north of Scotland. One of the lads in that CU decided to invite his entire online gaming server to every single event the CU put on that week, and I could not have been more encouraged.

I was just so excited to get on with the ministry that was happening there, because I saw the witness of his life and his confidence in the Lord Jesus, and honestly, that really spurred on the rest of the CU, and it just became a really joyful and thankful week.

The mission was tough. It was online, but there's a real sense of coming together and giving our lives to Christ in that mission, and actually, sometimes that's exactly what we need, to be encouraged as we see the examples of others, like the Macedonian church and their giving, and the Corinthian church and their giving.

[ 20 : 51 ] Paul says that thankfulness will just increase and increase, so maybe all the rest of us need to do is just give this a try. According to verse 14, those who received the gift from the Corinthians couldn't be happier, and that's expressed in their prayer for the Corinthians.

It's grace upon grace, joy upon joy, and a thankfulness that spirals out from the generosity of God that he has first shown to them. Maybe that could be the same for us.

Could we, both as a church and as individuals, really seek to be as generous as we can and see how God uses that? Maybe some of you are already experiencing this, some of this joy as you've chosen to give sacrificially recently.

Maybe if you're not giving, then this passage is inviting you not to guilt, but to a joyful change of heart. Come and give and trust that God in your giving will give to you that from him you will receive righteousness and thankfulness and joy.

In the end, you've got to ask yourself, what's going to make you happier? Your stuff, your status, and your security? Or giving those up to enjoy God more, to become closer to your Savior, to live more like Christ?

[ 22 : 18 ] It's not wrong to enjoy the gifts that you've been given. You've just got to figure out how to use them in the right way. I think the American pastor John Piper says this really well.

He helps us think through how to use the gifts that we've been given. He says, it's true that we should all bear testimony to the supremacy of God's goodness by receiving his good gifts with thanksgiving.

But for many Christians, that's become the only way that they see their lifestyles glorifying God. God has been good and given them so much, therefore, they witness to the reality of God, and so take it and be thankful.

But even though it is true that we should thankfully enjoy what we have, there is a relentless call in the Bible not to just accumulate more and more things, but to give more and more, to be deprived of things when love demands it.

There are no easy rules to tell us whether the call in our lives is that of the rich young ruler to give away all he has or that of Zacchaeus to give away half of what he had. But what is clear from the New Testament is that suffering with joy, not gratitude and wealth, is the way that the worth of Christ shines most clearly.

[ 23 : 33 ] So I think it's exciting to think through what God might do with this and what he might do with the generosity that we show in our lives. Remember, it's not about the amount but the heart behind it, the cheerful confidence that we have in Jesus that says that we can give away because he has given to us.

Paul wants the Corinthians to be joyful and so he talks about giving. Giving Sunday isn't a chore or a guilt we can berate ourselves with, but an opportunity to grow massively in joy and to receive a totally refreshing view of money and giving.

God enables generosity to grow his people in faith for his glory. God has given to you that you might give generously. It's an opportunity to be like him.

There is more joy in knowing him than in all the stuff and status in the world you could have instead. You just have to start giving it away to find out. So let me pray for us to understand this.

Father, thank you that you have so generously given to us. You have given us life and breath and everything in our lives.

[ 24 : 48 ] And on top of that, Lord, you have given us the Lord Jesus who gave his life for us. Lord, after you have given us him, will you not also graciously give us all things? And Father, we long for that day when we see all of our gifts in the way that they are fully.

Lord, when we see you completely. And we long for that day. But until then, Lord, keep us enduring, keep us faithful, and keep us generous that we may live like our Heavenly Father as we see him in the face of Christ.

Amen. Well, we're now going to continue in prayer and we're going to hand over to Alan for our intercession.