

GENEROSITY: THE MANGER'S OTHER LESSON

When it came to missions and money, the Apostle Paul did things backwards. When Paul went on his missionary trips around the Mediterranean, he took offerings from the new churches he planted to support the home church in Jerusalem.

Think about that. Can you imagine American missionaries, for instance, Carl and Cindy Reed in Indonesia, asking Indonesian churches to take an offering for Bethel? The financial disparity between them and us makes the idea unimaginable!

In our unique cultural context, giving almost never flows back towards us. American churches are generous with those we seek to reach with the Gospel. We don't feel patronizing, but parental – parent churches taking care of their kids.

Paul lived in a very different world. Economic and social distinctions were less varied as you traveled from place to place. His world was flatter. For Paul it only made sense that those who shared in the spiritual blessings of the mother church should share back with them material blessings. So he took offerings to send back home.

The home church in Jerusalem was having a tough time. The entire Roman Empire suffered a severe famine from about 44-48 AD. Christians in Jerusalem suffered badly and never entirely recovered. They had already depleted many of their reserves in order to care for the influx of new believers who lingered in Jerusalem in the days after Pentecost. And their economic plight was deepened by the pressures brought against them by the temple authorities.

So Paul's response was immediate. His training in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as his grasp of Jesus' own teaching demanded action. He organized offerings. Everywhere he planted churches, he impressed on them the necessity of generosity.

That's the back story to something Paul wrote in his second letter to the Church in Corinth. They had organized a relief offering for Jerusalem and had were off to a good start. Paul urges them to finish well. He offers as encouragement the example of the Macedonian churches, Philippi and Thessalonica, their neighbors to the north. And he clinches his argument with an object lesson from the incarnation of Jesus, an appeal to what Jesus did at Christmas. Let's turn to 2 Cor. 8:1-9.

We are calling this the manger's other lesson. What was the first? Humility. *Kenosis*. The *self-emptying* of Jesus and the *extreme generosity* of Jesus are the only New Testament references to Jesus' birth outside the Gospels in the New Testament. We already talked about his humility. Today we want to talk about Jesus' generosity.

And let's be clear up front that Paul isn't talking about regular church giving here. This isn't about tithing. Paul is instructing the church about how to honor God beyond the tithe in response to significant needs. We call that benevolent giving – dollars we give that go directly to help others.

Many of you have already done that this holiday season. For instance, our church family put together over six-hundred shoe boxes for Operation Christmas Child. We overflowed the box in the lobby with toys for Youth Haven Ranch. We have donated dollars and food stuffs for Christmas baskets.

We call Christmas a season for giving, and you do that. You ought to hear Betty Brockie, our Benevolent Team chair, brag on her church family. She is proud of how her church responds to needs. We have done well.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, a Greek city, dislocated geographically and culturally

from Israel, because they had started well. They were the first to sign on to Paul's call for relief aid for desperately needy brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. So he urges them: "Finish."

He does so without using any of the marketing devices we're accustomed to from people who want to get into our pockets. Syracuse Professor Arthur Brooks lists a number of motives that drive our giving: "...the 'warm glow' one feels from giving, the provision of goods for one's own social group (such as a church) [we call that meeting the budget], guilt, duty, social pressure, or the pursuit of status."

He adds: "...researchers conducting experiments on human subjects have even found what looks suspiciously like real altruism – giving to others whom they do not know and will never meet" (*Who Really Cares*, p. 26).

Paul doesn't appeal to any of these motives. He doesn't guilt them into giving. He doesn't appeal to their own self-interest. He doesn't make them sound noble for stepping up with their hard-earned cash. Paul's appeal resonates with a uniquely Christian word, one he uses five times in the language he wrote (we only see it four times in our translations). What is it? *Grace*:

- "...we want you to know about the *grace* given the Macedonian churches..."
- "...bring to completion this act of *grace* on your part."
- "...just as you excel in everything...see to it that you excel in this *grace* of giving."
- "For you know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

As Paul uses the term here, grace is an enabling gift from God providing us both the desire and the capacity to accomplish God's purposes. Grace takes us deeper into God's own heart and awakens responses that transcend the limits of human compassion.

That's what happened in the churches of Macedonia. They were in a severe trial of persecution. When Paul wrote his second letter to the church in Thessalonica, he wrote: "...among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring" (2 Thes. 1:4). People in their community treated them like a despised minority. Life was hard for them.

And they were in extreme poverty – Paul calls it the depths of poverty. We might call it the pits. What would be your response to those circumstances? I'd want to pull in my horns, restrict expenditures, horde what few reserves I could to make it through the hard times.

Grace enables an overflowing joy and rich generosity that isn't dependent on circumstances.

One of the primary reasons Americans cite for not giving in response to human need is that they can't afford it. And sometimes they really can't. Someone earning a six figure income can be overwhelmed with debt. They don't have the financial margins to be generous.

Also, even though wealthy people give more dollars overall, they give a smaller percentage of their income. On average, the less money people have, the more they give proportionally. Perhaps we should ask God to reduce our incomes to a level that allows us to be more generous!

Grace doesn't even consider how much you have or don't have. It's not dependant on the economy, one's income, or even if one is unemployed. I talked with one of our members recently who has been out of work. He spoke with obvious joy about the opportunity of helping out someone else who was in deeper financial distress.

God's grace makes us better than we are. It changes us from the inside out so that our hearts beat in tune with God's heart.

That's why Paul challenges the Corinthians. They prided themselves on their great worship services with all the showy spiritual gifts – *charismata*, graces – on display. Paul says: "...see that you also excel in this grace of giving."

Now, you may be wondering: If generosity is a grace, a gift from God, how do we excel

in it? It's all a God-thing, right? How do I excel in something that comes from God?

The same way we excel in any gift. For instance, one of our members has the spiritual gift of mercy. She understands how to come along side hurting people and offer comfort. It's a gracious gift God has given her. And she has become God's active partner in the exercise of this grace. She takes special care to cultivate the sensitivity God has given her toward others. She excels at showing mercy.

We excel in the grace of giving by our generous response to God's initiative – we run with God. When God puts a need in front of us and prompts us to give, we can choose to resist, to ignore grace and deny the impulse. We can always think of reasons to conserve our resources. Those who excel in the grace of generosity sense the wind of God's Spirit filling their own spirits and they allow themselves to move with the Spirit. God gives them the desire and the capacity to respond, and they do.

The supreme example of this kind of grace, Paul says, is Jesus: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

At Christmas, Jesus impoverished himself. He gave everything away: glory, privilege, power, the majesty and wealth of heaven. He became poor – so poor he was manger born. He spent his infancy as an immigrant refugee in Egypt. During his itinerant ministry he owned nothing beyond what he could carry. When he died, soldiers gambled to claim his clothes – his only inheritance.

Jesus became poor so that we, through his poverty, might become rich. That's the *grace* of Jesus. The grace of generosity says it's not about us, it's about the needs of others. It's not about our circumstances, it's about God's grace, God's resources.

In the next chapter Paul will write: "...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. As it is written: 'He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.' Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on *every* occasion" (2 Cor. 9:8-11a).

My boys and I enjoy hunting. We start thinking about it as soon as the DNR publishes the hunting regulations each year. We're especially attentive to the seasons. For instance, today is the last day to hunt bucks with a muzzle-loader. But we can fill a doe tag until January 1. Then the deer season closes and we have to wait for another year.

We call Christmas the season for giving, and in many respects, it is uniquely that. But from the perspective of God's Kingdom, there is no closed season on giving. The grace of generosity is always on call, always available, always looking for responsive hearts.

May the example of our Lord Jesus be a personal challenge to us to excel at the grace of giving. Not because we feel guilty. Not because we feel noble and warm about helping others. Not because it's expected. Not because it's Christmas. But because we're responding to the grace God puts in our hearts – the desire and the capacity for joy-filled generosity. Whether it's putting our spare change in a Salvation Army bucket, delivering meals, cutting a check – it's grace. Grace from God. Grace in us. Grace that blesses others.