

Around the second or third century, an anonymous letter surfaced in the ancient world, which was one of the earliest examples of Christian apologetics. The purpose of the letter was to describe what this growing movement around the ancient world called Christianity was about. Its author writes about all that makes the Christians different and distinct from the Roman world. It is a small glimpse into how the early Christians were viewed in the ancient world. The letter is written to a man named Diognetus, who was not a follower of Jesus. Read this excerpt from chapter 5 of the letter.

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity...Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed...They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all.

The letter is a fascinating look into the early Christian movement and details several distinctives about this early Christian movement that enabled it to gain traction in the pagan Roman world that was predominately opposed to nearly all things Christian. Some of the defining and strange things noted were their direct opposition to racism in all its forms, the high regard for life at all stages, and their sexual ethic was vastly different than that of the Roman World.

But did you notice at the very end of the quote I mentioned, "They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all." One of the central reasons the church was able to proliferate throughout the Roman and ancient world was the believer's common life was marked by radical generosity. The pagan world couldn't believe how quick the Christians were to give away their money. Not only in their ability to give generously but their vision of their possessions had radically shifted toward simplicity amongst opulence and sumptuous living. They demonstrated radical hospitality, welcome, and generosity that baffled the ancient world.

So, how did the Roman Empire, which was opposed to the way of Jesus in almost every way, become the environment in which Christianity could flourish? The Romans simply couldn't figure out how or why someone would live the way the Christians lived.

Maybe a good question for us today as we continue talking about generosity and giving is how would the Bay Area and the world around us

view the church's generosity? How would your co-workers, neighbors, and classmates view you? Are you marked by the same radical generosity, which marked the early believers? Or does how we handle money and our view of money look identical to the world around us?

Followers of Jesus live radically generous lives by participating in God's economy.

So let's jump into the text today. As you may or may not remember, Paul is writing to address a particular situation. A famine had hit the Church in Jerusalem. They were facing some incredibly difficult circumstances, so Paul is writing to several churches asking that they give to help their fellow believers. Paul is raising money for famine relief for the church in Jerusalem.

The text is rather long, so I've divided it and the sermon into four sections. In each section, Paul is describing the various ways we can participate in God's Economy.

The Stewardship of God's Economy - 2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

The Principles of God's Economy - 2 Corinthians 9:6-9

The Source of God's Economy - 2 Corinthians 9:10-11

The Impact of God's Economy - 2 Corinthians 9:12-15

The Stewardship of God's Economy

Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his initiative. And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. 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 man.

In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. 2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

After having laid out several motivations for giving, Paul now finishes the chapter by writing a recommendation letter to the church about Titus and two other anonymous believers. Paul was sending an "advance team" ahead of his arrival to help prepare the church for the offering, casting vision, and beginning to collect for the gift.

The collection was to be a sizable and generous gift, and it would take significant advance planning to gather the funds, so Paul saw fit to send a group ahead of his arrival to ensure the proper stewardship of the gift. *"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 man" (2 Cor. 8:20-21).* Paul wants to assure the Corinthians that their generosity will be carefully stewarded and administrated.

Paul is aware of their concern that so many of us are concerned about today. Christian leaders can mismanage and misuse the gifts of others. It is unfortunate, but we see this all the time in the Church. So Paul is careful to explain how their gifts will be managed. He is going to keep the books open; he is not going to hide behind spiritual platitudes like, "Only God knows our hearts." He'll manage things in a way that's not only right before God but also right before the eyes of the onlooking culture.

I think this is an important point for us to heed, and I want to encourage you to take the same precautions Paul is making here. You should be discerning in your giving. Ask questions, be careful, if something doesn't seem quite right or appears funny, don't give to that ministry. And this applies to this church as well. You have every right to ask us questions about how the money you give us is spent. So, stewardship in God's economy requires accountability and transparency.

The Principles of God's Economy

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good

work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever." vv. 6-9

"Remember this..."

This is Paul's way of saying, "listen up!" or "Here's the point." After all that he has shared, Paul says, "Let me remind you of the basic elements of what you are participating in." God's economy functions differently than the world's. Most scholars agree that Paul is quoting a popular saying of his day, "sow sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." While the origin of the phrase is elusive, the principle is not. We harvest in proportion to our planting.

Three things should be noted about the principles of God's economy... (v. 9:7)

"Each of you..."

Giving is an individual act that you determine. The question of, "How much?" is something that the individual must determine. As Mark mentioned last week, there is no New Testament command for a specific amount or percentage. Rather, the posture of the New Testament is that we give in accordance to how we believe the spirit leads us in radical generosity and in response to the generosity shown to us in the gospel.

"should give what you have decided."

Giving requires resolve. The verb here means "to choose deliberately." There is intentionality and follow-through. Giving is a calculated decision and not something done purely by impulse or an emotional response. It is not a matter to be settled lightly or impulsively. Very clearly, Paul says we are not to give out of reluctance, and we are not to give because of some sort of command or coercive compulsion.

"in your heart to give..."

Giving is a private, not a public act. Christian generosity is not done to receive public acclaim or recognition but should be carried out in a private manner. The real reason to give is not for recognition and not for public praise, but because you cannot help but give. This is one reason why at CPC, no one knows what someone gives; we are not going to put up a plaque or list the names of generous givers.

"For God loves a cheerful giver..."

The word here for cheerful is the Greek word *hilaron*. This is the same root word where we derive our English word hilarious. A cheerful giver (or hilarious giver) is a direct reflection of a heart that the gospel has shaped. And this is why God loves a cheerful giver because God recognizes that to give cheerfully, there must be a level of heart transformation from the grace of God that has been so freely given to us!

And we should strive not to worry because Paul says clearly and poetically, *"And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work" (v. 8).* The principle of God's economy is that God is comprehensive. He will bless you, equip you, and ensure that you can *"abound in every good*

work." We serve a God of abundance and readiness for you to partake in every good work.

Just over a year ago, my oldest daughter, Madison, got together with a few of her friends, and they put together a "Unicorn Hot Chocolate Stand." For a few hours, they sat on our street and sold hot chocolate to any and all passing neighbors. After a few hours, they earned over \$100.

At first, the girls were at a loss as to what to do with their newfound fortune. But after some consideration of a few options, they whole-heartedly and enthusiastically decided it would be best to give 100 percent of the money away. The idea that they could give back to others who were in need thrilled them. So we marched inside and donated the money to St. Jude's Children's Hospital. This is cheerful giving, hilarious giving of 100 percent of a "Unicorn Hot Chocolate" stand. This is leaning into the fact that God gave Madison and her friends all they needed to "abound in every good work." The principles of God's economy free us to abound in every good work.

These principles help us engage in God's economy, but what is the source of God's economy? Paul addresses this next.

The Source of God's Economy

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 enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. vv. 10-11

Because we live in the modern world saturated with an ethic of self-sufficiency, it is easy for us to forget that in God's economy, the source of our generosity is not ourselves or our ability. But the source of all things is the gift from God as abundant creator.

Notice Paul's careful wording here. Paul says two specific things that are supplied by God—seed, and bread. Let's look at the first one.

Seed - Raw materials

The seed is representative of the raw materials of the world. Everything created is built on the raw materials of the earth, on the biological matter—trees, water, dirt, grass, rain, vegetation, animals, humans, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, and phosphorous—every molecule on earth finds its source in God. The Christian worldview recognizes that all of life is a gift from God. All created things are a gift that God has given to us. So when we consider the source of God's economy, it is not us, but it is, in fact, God.

But I can still hear my modern, sensible, Western self saying, "But I still worked for it, I still took the raw materials and made things out of it. It was still the result of my own effort." Maybe, but notice how Paul confronts that for the Christian; the second thing he says God provides is bread.

Bread - Creative Power

What does bread represent? Bread is the result of creativity, reason, intellect, and will. It is the result of someone taking grain, flour, yeast and

creating a loaf of bread. It represents someone working, but Paul says that your very ability to create and work is a gift from God. You see, Christians cannot even claim their own creative power as their own. It, too, is the result of the gift of God, who provided us with the ability, free will, and creativity to generate and create products. The very ability to work and to create finds its source in God's generosity.

This is God's economy—both raw materials and creative abilities are gifted to us. Paul is de-centering us as the individual and centering the generosity and gift of God. When we can grasp this, we become mere conduits of God's generous abundance—receiving and giving.

But even if that wasn't enough, Paul goes one step further to ensure that we don't think we are the primary ends of God's economy.

Harvest of Righteousness/Justice

Paul reminds us that the harvest, the result of all the economic activity we find ourselves involved with, is not for our own benefit. Again, this is so difficult for us to grasp because we are conditioned to believe it is for our own sake. But for the Christian, *"You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God"* (v. 11).

Everything is given to us from God; everything is the result of God's gracious activity in our life: the creative mind God gave you for free, with the raw materials of the earth God gave you for free, and with the very life and breath that is a gift to you for free. Everything you have is a result of God's goodness to us, everything! The source of our generosity in God's economy is God's abundance, not our ability or provision.

There is nothing that you or I have that we ultimately own. All of the best earthly gifts will one day pass away; all of our creative power has been endowed to us by God. In response to this, we recognize that our lives are not our own as followers of Jesus. We surrender them to a calling that is beyond what we see right in front of us. For all of life is a gift.

This principle is all over the scriptures; look at what Paul said in his first letter to Corinth. *"...What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"* (1 Cor. 4:7). All of life is a gift; everything you have, everything you own, everything you could have is all a gift. You are not your own. And this gift is meant to be given away; this is the source of our generosity. The source of our generosity in God's economy is God's abundance.

The Impact of God's Economy

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! vv. 12-15

Paul states two significant impacts of the life marked by generosity, which gets to the biblical conception of our humanity because it addresses the fullness of who we are. The Christian worldview of the human understands people as both spiritual and material—body and spirit. All of which encompasses the individual. This is what it means to be human.

A purely humanist perspective presents all of humanity is merely a bag of chemicals that simply react to differing stimuli. In this view, we are reduced to biological urges and impulses that are fully at the discretion of our physicality. But this view rejects the depth of our spirituality.

We are also spiritual beings. Our humanity consists of two dimensions; we are body and soul, material and spiritual. There is a material part to you and an immaterial part to you. Both important and worthy of dignity

This is what sets us apart from all of the other created order. Remember the creation story, God gathered dust from the ground and formed the human, but he didn't stop there. He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. That word for breath is the same word for spirit. You are a hybrid of both materials (made from the dust) and the spiritual (breath of God in you).

With that in mind, look at how Paul describes the impact of our generosity. *"This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God"* (v. 12).

Bodily and Material Needs: The first impact is the material needs of people. Radical generosity will provide meals, homes, clothes, sustenance, medicine, clean water, food, etc. Radical generosity, at its core, meets people's needs. It affirms the humanity and material aspect of our existence. It affirms the importance of bodily needs. Maybe put differently, radical generosity meets bodily and material needs.

But that is not all.

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! vv. 13-15

Soul and Spiritual Needs: Because we are both bodily and spiritual beings, both needs must be met. We must be careful not to reduce our giving solely to either of these directions. To give purely to the physical needs is to neglect the spiritual needs of others. The inverse is also true; giving only for spiritual witness is to neglect the dignity of the individual's physical nature. Radical generosity embraces the integrated whole

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

of the individual and seeks a holistic response through our generous giving.

Churches are uniquely qualified among other organizations to address the complex nature of the individual. Churches have always given to meet bodily needs. Think of the many ways we have helped build schools, feed the homeless, cared for the sick and hospitalized, etc. By its nature, the church is equipped to also provide for the spiritual needs of our community. The religious institutions can do the feeding, etc., and can also provide the meaning or purpose of life. Without which, dealing with all the physical needs, will be rendered meaningless. People without meaning, purpose, or telos will wither. Physical and spiritual go together.

In sum, the impact of participating in God's economy addresses both the physical and spiritual needs of others. This brings me back to my original point. Followers of Jesus live radically generous lives by participating in God's Economy. And all of this flows from a response to God's gracious work in us. Church, may we come to participate in God's economy in the same way, recognizing that our lives are to reflect the radical generosity that God has given us. Amen.

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