

The Privilege of Generosity

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[0 : 0 0] and we're going to be looking at certain aspects of this chapter this morning. I'm hoping that today is going to mark a new beginning in the life of the congregation, at least the beginning of the beginning of a new life in the congregation.

By eight and a half years ago when we came here first, you heard a lot about the various texts that God spoke powerfully to, about here one being from Isaiah chapter 43 verse 18. I will do a new thing and also one from Acts chapter 18 verse 10, which saying, I have many people in this city. And that was a great encouragement to me and to us at the time. And I believe it's time to kind of renew these and look at them again afresh, because God has placed us in this city, right in the city centre of Edinburgh, and we love being here. It's a great place to be. We love the fact that it's time of year, lots of visitors come to us, and it's a great encouragement for us. We love the fact that there's a lot of students come to the congregation.

[1 : 1 1] We love the fact that people come and move into the city and are part of the work here. But I love the fact that Jesus Christ loves this city as well, and that He promises that He has many people that are to be drawn in to this city.

And we still have a part to play in that. We have a part to play as we have grown and developed. We want to move forward and we want to progress within that work.

And so today, later on in the sermon, I'm going to introduce a proposal to you for a new full-time worker in the congregation. That will come later.

First of all, I want to look at this theme of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. And really, the theme is very much generosity that comes across in this passage.

Paul is speaking to the church in Corinth. He's speaking to them. In fact, he's writing to them. It's the second letter he's written to them. And he's really following in the letter. He's following up a lot of things.

[2 : 2 2] But one of the things he's following up is he's following up a commitment that the Corinthian church made to support God's work, particularly to support God's people in Jerusalem who were poverty-stricken at that time for a variety of reasons, and they had promised that they would support that work.

And so he's following up on that promise that they had made to collect regularly for God's people in Jerusalem and elsewhere.

And he's basically encouraging them not to give up on this work and to follow through their promises and their love for that people. And one of the ways he does that is by giving them the example of the Macedonian churches in chapter 8, the first section he's speaking about, the amazing generosity of the Macedonian churches.

That would be the churches you're quite familiar with from the New Testament, the churches in Philippi, in Thessalonica and in Berea. And Macedonia and the churches in Macedonia were churches, or that region was a region that was very poor, partly because they had a name for being rebellious against the Roman governing authorities.

And so they were kind of under the cosh as it were from the Roman Empire, and they were very poor. And yet, despite being very poor, we recognise, and Paul recognised that they were also very generous.

[4 : 0 1] In verse 2 he says, out of the most extreme trial, that is they were a kind of persecuted church and they were opposed and they were given hard times, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

Now that word extreme poverty, that phrase extreme poverty, we could just translate as rock bottom poverty. That's the situation they were in. They were being persecuted and they were experiencing rock bottom poverty.

So it's just the worst kind of church scenario for talking about generosity and helping others. It seemed it would take all of their time just to survive themselves, rock bottom poverty and persecution.

Yet Paul goes on to express the amazing nature of this congregation and these congregations, that they were full of joy and generosity in the way that they were helping other churches, particularly the church in Jerusalem at that time.

They were giving beyond sacrificially. They gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. So there was this amazing generosity that came from this people that was more than sacrificial.

[5 : 28] And more than that, it was also great because it was super voluntary. They really wanted to help in this way. Entirely on their own they pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

That's an amazing attitude towards giving, isn't it? That we probably find a bit difficult to sympathise with at some degrees. They were super voluntary. They were pleading for the opportunity and the privilege of helping in the Gospel ministry in this way.

And within all of that, we recognise that it was spiritually rooted. They did not give as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

They had this great rooted relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. They loved Him. They were firstly committed to Him and it was from that love and commitment and service that they were able to give with such generosity even though they were persecuted and even though they had hit rock-bottom poverty.

So that's the example that we're given in this passage. I just want to look briefly at one or two of the principles about giving that are peppered throughout this passage.

[6 : 55] And I'm using the phrase, the three G's, the grace of generous giving. Three G's was a nightclub in Aberdeen when I was a student. There was a den of iniquity, so I'm redeeming this title and taking it back into the Lord's service.

Three G's is not a nightclub anymore. It's the three G's, the grace of generous giving that we see in this passage. And you know, in eight and a half years I have very rarely preached on giving.

Very rarely preached on giving. There's maybe reasons for that. I think the emphasis is, I've emphasised it a little, maybe we just presumed that we give to the Lord's cause and that's part of what we are and what we do.

And maybe that's wrong. But there are reasons why it's really difficult for a minister to preach about giving. I think sometimes we associate it with being worldly. You can't talk about money in the church.

Church is all about being spiritual, holy. And money is a terrible thing to talk about in the church.

And so there's maybe that association with it being business-like or kind of worldly.

[7 : 59] But there's also a reticence, I think, on a preacher's part because it gives the impression that the minister's at the front and he's preaching, he's preaching for his pay. Because it's you guys that pay me.

So there's this danger that you need a pay rise, so I better start preaching about giving again, which obviously isn't the case. We don't get pay rises in the free church. And there's that whole mistrust, I think, within us of institutions asking for support and just the proliferation that you get of requests and demands for cash.

Then there's also more theological things. There's a fear of the whole aspect of the prosperity gospel that sometimes gets preached which, believe, is twisted and isn't biblical.

The health, wealth and prosperity gospel is, you know, if you give to the Lord and he'll give back to you and you'll be rich and you'll be wealthy and you'll be prosperous, which is not a biblical theological emphasis that we would agree with.

We don't see our coming to Christ as a means of material prosperity and well-being in and of itself.

[9 : 10] And of course there's the fear going back in history in centuries of indulgences where maybe we are afraid of encouraging people to give to the church as if somehow by giving to the church you're redeeming your soul or you're doing something that will earn you favour in God's sight.

And we shy away from all that emphasis in our understanding of the gospel and in our understanding of truth. We know that we are saved by grace.

We are saved by the love and by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and we can't earn our salvation either by good works or by good giving. You recognise and know that.

But, you know, I would be a dishonest preacher of the truth if we didn't look at the subject because the Bible has lots to say about it. And I want to say and I want to challenge us today about it for a few moments.

In principal terms from this passage, I'm not going to look at everything the Bible has to say, but just one or two things here. And for me the most important one comes across in verse 8.

[10:21] It's that we give to the Lord Jesus Christ with our giving financially and with our material wealth out of love, not out of law.

So Paul says in verse 8, I'm not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. And throughout God's word we find that emphasis, that our motivation is to be from our heart's desire and a recognition of who the Lord is and what he has done for us spiritually and therefore that we return to him, recognizing his sovereignty and his lordship over all that we are and all that we receive from him.

Every good gift comes from him and is a recognition of that, apart from anything else, we return to him from what we've been given as a recognition of our desire and our love for him and for his cause.

You see, it's always the case, isn't it, that we will spend on what is important in our hearts. We will spend money on what matters to us, what's significant to us in our lives and that whole reality comes through all the time in our understanding of the Bible, our giving in service, our worship, our commitment, our willingness to serve, our love for others.

All that we do stems from our heart's desires and stems from what we want and we recognize that that is what will make us generous.

[12:02] Paul recognizes that. He doesn't really, in a sense, he does highlight the Macedonian people, but he doesn't pat them so much in the back as recognizing that they received grace from God too.

Verse 1 he says that, and now brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. It was the fact that he changed their hearts and that he gave them that generosity so that we look at, not a legal obligation, no, I must, I ought to, it should be the case, but rather that my heart would have this desire and this love and it may drive, it certainly drives me to prayer.

I hope it drives you to prayer also. That sacrificial grace giving love, willing spirit that they were able to urgently plead for the privilege of sharing.

I think sometimes we've lost that particular attitude in giving. It may be for us sometimes a grudging command, ooh, well I ought to, why better, well I must, well I'm supposed to, but as we find here, there's tremendous desire that it's love and not law.

And it's kind of backed up by a second principle of really Christ, Christ being our example in verse 9, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that through his poverty you might become rich.

[13:38] And that's not referring to financial wealth, but the whole spiritual inheritance that we receive in Christ and the glory of that. But it's an example of his willingness to empty himself and give everything for us to die on the cross with such love, such generosity, such an eager spirit, such a desire to do so in order that we can be redeemed, in order that we can be forgiven, in order that we can have life, in order that we can praise Him, in order that we can have perspective and direction and hope and meaning and a future in Him.

He has done all that, He has given all that. He's an example really, I can't add anything to that. If you can't see it, then I can't add anything to that. If you can't see what Christ has done, even just simply from that word, then it's difficult to add feeble words on my part to try and make it loving and committed and sacrificial for us.

If you don't believe it, then you certainly won't give. But we are encouraged to give because of what Christ has given to us, absolutely, entirely holding nothing back.

So there's Christ as an example, then there's also proportionality. In verse 12 we talk about, if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable, not according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

And that fits in with a lot of teaching in the Bible about our giving, that it's to be proportional as to what we have been given. In the Old Testament, the rule of thumb was a tenth.

[15 : 27] And then we can maybe add to that in the New Testament. And the whole idea is redistribution. The whole idea is that we share in what we have been given and share it with others.

There's also the whole idea of first fruits. It's a recognition that what we have is a gift, and as a recognition of that, we return part of it to God through his church so that the gospel can flourish and the work can grow.

It's an act of worship, an act of love, an act of sharing and equality. And we recognize that within our own denomination.

It's good to have sometimes a denomination to be where a Presbyterian church in them. If others hadn't given, when this church had just 15 people in it eight years ago, then it would have been closed.

It wouldn't have progressed. We couldn't have gone on. And so when we were weak, many other churches gave so that we could work here. And so we want to get to the position where we are strong and can give to other churches in the gospel that can flourish elsewhere so that we don't just think about ourselves.

[16 : 36] So generosity. And the last thing I want to mention here before talking about it briefly, the proposal, is blessing. Again, in verse 10, he speaks about blessing in the next chapter, in chapter 9.

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'll be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.

It's a magnificent promise based on the character of God and the nature of God that as we move forward and as we move onward and as we move outward in faith, that God honors that.

As we give sacrificially, not just of our material prosperity but of ourselves in our lives, that he honors that even when we give against the odds.

Because it's his work. This is God's kingdom. And we're doing it for God's sake. And we believe there will be God's harvest as we invest in the work, as we invest in the kingdom.

[17 : 48] And I do believe, although we don't believe in a health wealth and prosperity gospel, we do believe that God does honor us, both materially and spiritually, and in every other way.

So it's interesting, there's that kind of mixture of the temporal and the spiritual. We have God working in both here. And that's of course right, because he's sovereign over all of our lives, over every part of our lives.

Our pocket, in other words, affects our soul. That's quite interesting. I don't know if we've ever thought about it in that way. I remember hearing the story of a minister who was trying to plug a project in the congregation.

And he said, the good news is that we have the money for this project to go ahead. And he said, but the bad news is that it's in your pockets. Now I don't believe that, I don't think that's right.

I think the good news is that we have a project to go ahead with. The even better news is that the money's in your pockets. Because we want to have this great, urgent desire and willingness and pleading for the privilege of sharing in the gospel to which God has called us.

[19 : 01] He has brought us to the kingdom for such a time as this. So I don't think it's a case of good news, bad news, I hope. But rather, good news, even better news. So, can I bring to you the proposal of the Kirk session for this morning, which I hope that I'll just present and then this evening we'll have a congregational fellowship where you can ask lots of your questions and maybe unleash your fears and concerns over the whole proposal.

But we're at the stage, roughly, as a congregation where on a Sunday morning, certainly during term time there's around about 150 people. Now that ebbs and flows a great deal.

And for example this summer we'll be losing about 30 people for various reasons, but we're hoping and we've already seen people coming into the congregation so we hope that that'll be equalised and even expanded so that maybe there'll be more than that during term time.

But there is that large turnover. And I and James and the elders are at a stage where we feel really fully engaged. Most of the hours of every day is engaged in the work of the congregation here.

And we feel we're struggling in many ways to pastor and to develop the work of the congregation and to reach out. We're firefighting. We're keeping things going. But in terms of quality, time and effort and energy, not only to pastor what we have, but to develop the work and to progress the

work, we are fully stretched.

[20 : 33] Now that's been a matter of frustration for us and also a cause of concern and prayer. And we've been praying about the situation. And we believe God has answered our prayers to a degree at this stage.

And he's made a great provision for us, we believe. We have a sympathetic Christian donor who is knowing the situation and knowing our congregational needs has promised to give half funding for a full-time worker in the congregation for three years.

Because that's half funding. That's not full funding for a half worker, but half funding for a full-time worker in the congregation. And in terms of that provision, we also have an elder in the congregation who is willing to commit to that work, to give up his work, his employment, and be employed with the church, Tom Muir.

Tom has worked Christian service before. He has a heart for Christian service. He feels called to serve the Lord in this way.

So there has been a provision at that level, which is great. But the challenge from here is really massive for us. There's a big challenge for us, because we have been asked, or I'm proposing to you today on behalf of the elders in the Deacons Court that we rise to the challenge of meeting the other half of what is required of us.

[22 : 09] Now that is a really big challenge for a congregation like ours, because we're very transient, we've got a lot of students, they're not earning, and all kinds of things. So there is a real challenge for us.

And it's a real challenge, because at the moment, we're barely making ends meet, okay? The two ends of the spring are just about coming together, and no more.

But I don't think it should be. I think we should be well able to meet our own needs at the moment. But there does need to be an upping of the profile of giving and of commitment and of serving in that way.

But our hope and our prayer and our proposal is to go forward with your support and with your approval. And tonight, I would hope that we could discuss that with you more and get your ideas and get your thoughts and explain the potential post in more detail.

I know it's a bit of a chicken and an egg situation. It's difficult to make a proposal without making plans. And yet it's difficult making plans without feeling that it's all in place, but it's not.

[23 : 15] And we are looking very much forward to your input on this particular challenge. Now if you're visiting with us today, I do apologise for being so insular about our needs.

I hope that I'm preaching the gospel, but at the same time I recognise it's a very congregational matter, but it won't take much longer. And I hope that you will pray for us as you go from here if you are visiting with us today.

But the challenge for us then is really great and it's a really big challenge. We're looking to raise from the congregation extra, £13,000 extra a year over the next three years.

Now we're going to put a letter to the congregation, to everyone in the congregation with more details and with more information. And we hope to put letters out to friends of St. Columbus as well. So if you know any friends of St. Columbus, then please let us know and we shall put out the letter to them also. But at the same time, even more challenging, we want to not only maintain what we give to our central church, but we want to increase that giving as well.

[24 : 27] We recognise that's a great challenge. We recognise that we're indebted to the wider church, because we wouldn't have been here if it wasn't for their support of us in the early days.

And so we are looking to maintain that commitment to the wider church. The challenge is to have the majority of that funding pledged by the end of August, so that the post could start if that was the case and if the money was pledged, at least the majority of it for October start.

And the work would be work of pastoral work, working with children, young people, and outreach, developing outreach work within the congregation.

It would be great to get to the stage in this congregation in however many years it takes. At the moment we've got about 80 or so members, professing members of the congregation.

We'd like to get to the stage of having about 150 members. If we had about 150 members, we would think of siphoning off 30 or 40 of them and planting a church, so that the church is going to spread and grow in the city.

[25 : 38] Now we know we're not alone in that. We know there's lots of other churches in Edinburgh that are growing and progressing and developing. We don't have a dafts of idea that we're the only church doing these things, but we want to be part of an ongoing work for this city.

Hundreds of thousands of people in this city, a minute percentage of them know Jesus Christ, minute number. And we want to spread that gospel and spread that work through what we believe is church growth and church planting.

And to do that, we really need everybody contributing to that work and supporting that work and being challenged joyfully and spiritually to do so willingly, not as a command, but as a recognition, as a reflection of the love of Christ who has transformed our lives and given us everything in order that we can share in this privilege and in this kingdom.

So we have that proposal. And as part of that, and maybe spilled into that, we have a vision for tomorrow, which is part of our proposal. And that is that we believe in the spiritual investment in the congregation.

Well-bearing returns. We've had great God. Now, we were speaking here about great promises, and so we're looking forward to God.

[27 : 05] As we invest in His work, blessing that. Now, there's a great risk there. There's a great challenge. I'm very excited.

But let me tell you, I'm also very afraid. It's fearful to put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and it's fearful to entrust ourselves to His promises.

But it's also exciting. It's driven me to prayer. I hope it will drive you to prayer as well. I want the sermon to go onto our website so that all of our congregation, especially our young people who are not here, will also hear it as well, because they will benefit, and they will be partly who are being invested in also.

But let us have the faith to test Him, and let us expect a harvest. Now, I've seen, I've been a Christian for about 30 years, and there's been many times where I've had nothing at all, really, financially.

I've never had very much financially, but there's been times when, nonetheless, a challenge has gone out to give and to support.

[28 : 19] And she said, well, I ought to. I shouldn't say, I should have said, I desire, I love to, but I've sometimes said, well, I ought to. Maybe because I've got a burden for a particular work. And it's been, maybe, humanly speaking, an unwise move to make.

But never once in that 30 years have I been God's debtor. Never once. God has always provided, God has always blessed, God has always protected, God has always been full to His promises so that we have what we need, maybe not always what we want, but always what we need in His work, in His kingdom.

And I believe that will be our experience as a congregation. It's a challenge, and it's frightening, but I hope also encouraging and exciting.

Not just to see an investment, but also we believe in growing bigger and growing smaller. We want to grow bigger because there's a great encouragement in growing bigger.

It's a great encouragement in worshipping together with a big group of people in these days. You know, when it's a struggle to be a Christian. It's nice to do that. But also we recognize the importance of being small as well and of intimacy, something which you lose as you grow bigger.

[29 : 36] And so we've spent a lot of time investing in house groups and in mentoring and in, hopefully, prayer cells and in small group work. Now, all of that takes a tremendous amount of energy and effort and time.

And it's really hard work, but we see the value both of big and small together. And we hope to invest in that work through having more full-time workers.

And we hope that it will lead to greater effectiveness in the gospel here in Edinburgh. I don't believe for a moment that we're employing someone else just to pamper ourselves as a congregation.

That's something very far from our minds. It's not that at all, but rather that it would trigger within us a gospel-centered desire. And it would trigger resources from us so that not only could we afford to do this, but we can afford to support mission work more fully.

It's great to have Russell and Xana Phillips with us today. And we enjoyed their Russian evening on Friday. It's great we can support work in Novosibirsk. And it's also great we can support work in France that we'll be hearing about shortly.

[30 : 42] And in the prayer meeting on Wednesday, we'll talk about the work that's been done from here in the summer, in Eastern Europe and in camps and in missions and in elsewhere. And we love that ability. We love to be able to do that.

But it's sometimes difficult for us. We'd love to be able to plant another church. We would love to develop our social responsibility in the city to help those who need the gospel in great ways and to reach out to those who are not reaching with the love of Christ and the grace of Christ at the moment.

We hope that will bring glory to God in this city and in this community. And I love the way that Paul ends here by saying that because of the service by which you've proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ and for your generosity and sharing with them and with everyone else.

And in their prayers for you, their hearts will go out to you and the surpassing grace God has given to you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. I hope people will say that about us.

About us as a congregation. They will see us and they will thank God for us for seeing the grace of God at work in our hearts. And that's the challenge and the hope of the gospel that I want to present to you in that very practical way today.

[32 : 07] I believe in seeing that practical work flourish that will have much deeper and much wider spiritual implications for us. So please, if you belong to the congregation, come tonight to worship and also to our fellowship.

Believe that you've been brought to the kingdom for such a time of this and the challenges are we going to rise to it or are we going to retreat from it. And so please pray about these things today and you will get a proposal through the post and it will maybe have more details and it will be nicely produced, I hope, so that it will look like we're serious about what we're doing.

So let us give thanks to God and pray to him this morning. Heavenly Father, we thank you for our time together and for the opportunity not just to share the gospel and to worship God but to consider your own purposes and plans for us.

We are both excited and fearful. And we pray that a day like this would mark a new beginning for us and a new challenge and a new motivation and a new excitement that we would see that you love us and that you care for us and that you want us to be part of the gospel ministry in this city which has such a rich Christian heritage but has crumbled and fallen from it and is most secular and idolatrous and dark spiritually.

And Lord, we long to see many people in this city brought to Jesus Christ and to his liberating power. We thank you for the work that is done primarily among the tourists here on a Tuesday and Thursday as the church is open.

[33 : 52] And also we pray that local people would come in and around and would share in fellowship and hear the gospel as it is presented by those who help and by the films that are shown on the screens.

And all that is done may be done for the glory of God. So help us, we pray, guide us and bless us and watch over us and protect us this day, we ask.

In Jesus' name, Amen.