Generous Giving
2 Corinthians 9:1-15

We're looking at 2 Corinthians, and last week and this we're looking at these two chapters, 8 and 9, where Paul tackles the issue of money and giving. And he does it because he's trying to raise an offering for the Christians in Jerusalem who are suffering - and so he calls it, v1, 'the ministry for the saints.'

Now, any fundraiser faces a problem, doesn't he: 'How do you get people to part with their cash?!' But if Paul's got that problem, he's got another on top of it. And that's that when he first spoke to the Corinthians about this offering a year ago, they were all positive about it. So when he went up into Macedonia and the churches in Thessalonica and Philippi, he could tell them, 'guys, we're getting this offering together for our brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, and the guys in Corinth are up for it, how about you?' Verse 2, as Paul says to Corinthians 'I know your readiness of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia [that's the region Corinth is in] has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them.' In other words, the Macedonians heard that the Corinthians were in on this, and went, 'What a great idea, let's join them!'

But that was a year ago, and now the Corinthians' enthusiasm has dimmed. In fact, it's practically burnt out. And so Paul knows that if, when he comes to Corinth, some Macedonians come with him, it would be deeply embarrassing. And so Paul is sending Titus and a team on ahead with this letter, to re-inspire them to give and to organise the offering before he comes.

But what Paul writes here isn't just helpful for them, but for all of us. For any one who ever questions, 'what should I be doing with my money?' Or, 'do I really want to give some of it away, or cultivate a habit of giving?'

How We Should Give
And the first thing Paul tells them is not just that we *should* give, but that we should give *generously*. Look at v6, 'The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.'

So giving your money away, Paul says, is like a farmer sowing seed. And a farmer could go out with his bucket of seed and sow sparingly, couldn't he? He could keep his hand tightly closed and let the bare minimum of seed escape. Or, he could take a handful of seed and sow with an open hand, liberally and bountifully.

And Paul is saying, you and I can have the same attitude to giving. You can give sparingly, counting the pennies, giving the bare minimum, *or* you can give generously. Bountifully.

And there's a reason you want to do that, Paul says. And that's that what you get out of your giving, the fruit you'll see, crucially depends on which of those two attitudes to your giving you embrace.

I mean, think about this principle of 'you reap what you sow', and what you get back depends on what you put in. It applies to whole areas of life, doesn't it? Think hobbies or sport or learning a musical instrument like the violin. Throw yourself into them, apply yourself, and what you - and others - get out will be very different than if you can never quite be bothered. It'll be the difference between something sounding beautiful and a cat being strangled. Or think relationships: criticise and complain all the time and what you reap will be very different from the person who encourages and loves and serves those around them.

And Paul is saying, the same is true for giving: the bountiful giver is going to reap bountifully… but the sparing giver won't. So give… and give generously.

But, that's not the same as giving carelessly. Verse 7, 'Each one must give *as he has decided in his heart*.' So, it's not that a wealthy minority, or even the majority of a church should give, it's that *each one,* all of us, should sit down and decide, 'ok, what am I, what are we as a couple, as a family, going to give.' We're going to give generously, but not casually or impulsively, but thoughtfully.

But thirdly we're to give joyfully. Verse 7 again, 'Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.'

Now, last week we saw that one barrier to cultivating generosity is that we can think the amount we have to give is too small to matter. Another is that the comfort, or experiences, or security money can buy matter too much. And when any of those are the case, we might still give, but we tend to give reluctantly. We give, but in all honesty, we think it's not really worth it or we'd rather spend it elsewhere. So we give with regret. And giving from our financial resources isn't something we do with joy, in fact, it might even be the opposite.

So why would someone like that give at all? Why not just keep it for yourself? Because, Paul says, you can also give under compulsion. You feel obliged, you feel pressure to give. You'd feel guilty if you didn't. Maybe your own conscience pricks you. Maybe you think God is standing over you with a stick, watching you. Maybe you sense pressure from others - from Paul or a pastor. And then we give, but we give under compulsion, to get those watching eyes of conscience, or God, or others' off us.

And Paul is saying, don't give like that. Make your mind up for yourself what to give and give that happily. Because God loves a cheerful giver. I mean, think how a parent can be. They see their child behaving in a certain way and go, 'I just love it when she does that!' Or, 'I saw how your responded there and I am so proud of you.' And when God sees his kids giving their resources generously and joyfully, that's what he does. He loves it.

But if that's how we should give, Paul also says *why* we should do it in the first place.

Why We Should Give

And firstly and obviously, because it meets the needs of others. Verse 1 again, this collection is 'the ministry *for the saints*.' And v12, 'the ministry of this service is… supplying the needs of the saints.'

Now, one of the outcomes of our current individualistic, look-out-for-yourself culture, that celebrates the individual over communities and families and institutions, is that it's left us relationally all the poorer. But generous, joyful, thoughtful giving to meet the needs of others is the exact opposite of that because it says, 'we're family'. And it deepens ties, not weakens them. And the Christians in Jerusalem are in need, so their brothers and sisters in Corinth and Macedonia want to try and meet that need, because that's what loving families do.

And yet, that kind of physical need didn't end at the close of the 1st century did it? Because the poor, and the persecuted, are still with us. That may be our Christian brothers and sisters in Iran, or it might be a student with financial needs in our church, or a poor family in your neighbourhood. It's why when Paul wrote to the Ephesians he said, 'Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, *so that* he may have

something to share with anyone in need' (Eph 4:28). So, do we work and earn to meet our own needs? Sure we do. But we also do it so we have resources to share.

But, those needs aren't just physical. One of the Macedonian churches who's giving was so exemplary, the church at Philippi, financially supported Paul in his missionary work for more than a decade. And Paul tells them he prayed for them with joy, 'Because of your *partnership in the gospel* from the first day until now' (Phil 1:5). So they weren't just giving so Paul could eat. They were giving so others could hear the gospel. It's why Paul writes to the church in Galatia, 'Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches' (Gal 6:6) and earlier to the Corinthians that 'the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel' (1 Cor 9:14).

So we give to meet not just physical but spiritual needs. We give to see the gospel spread, to see good news go out, whether that's giving to us as a church, or to ministries like Colin and the GBEU, or even to our church building project. Because when you give to that, you're not giving so you can have a more comfortable seat on on a Sunday morning, are you! Believe me, they won't be! We're giving because the need of the spiritually poor in this region is huge and we want to build and grow in ways that meet that need and sees the gospel spread.

Ok, so we give to meet need. But Paul gives a second reason: that *you'll* reap a harvest if you do.

Verse 8, 'And God is able to make *all grace* abound to you, so that having *all sufficiency* in *all things* at *all times*, you may abound in *every good work*.' Verses 10-11: '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*. You will be *enriched in every way* to be *generous in every way*.'

So your financial resources, your salary, it's not money, is it. It's seed. And you're a farmer. The only question is, what will you sow your seed to? And what harvest will you yield? You see, God has provided for us financially, not so we can indulge ourselves and build bigger barns, but so we can live lives of blessing and service to others. We've been enriched, Paul says, so we can be generous. And our ability to do that does not depend on ourselves, but on God's limitless supply. That whatever our situation - even when things are financially tight, even when life is an emotional struggle, we find we always have something to give - our money, our time, our encouragement, our love, our presence, our prayers. And when we do, that kind of generous life multiplies.

And the reason it multiplies, Paul says, is that God blesses those who bless. He makes all grace abound. And the one who gives of themselves finds their resources to give multiplying. Now, does that mean financially? Well, for some it might. And having proved themselves trustworthy and generous with little, God gives them more and multiplies their seed for sowing. As one commentator says, 'God gives to givers so they can go on giving.'

But Paul also talks here of abounding *in good works*. That as you give generously and joyfully it does something in your heart - because you're not just investing your cash, you're investing your heart. And you'll find your interest in the people and the work you're giving to increasing, and your prayers for them and encouragement of them, and acts of service towards them will all grow. It's why Paul describes it as a 'harvest of your righteousness.' By cultivating generous, joyful, thoughtful giving, you will become spiritually richer, and your character will grow all the richer. It's why Jesus said it's by loosing yourself that you find yourself. It's in dying that you live. It's in giving that you receive. Secular culture says it's by promoting yourself and

protecting yourself and insisting on your rights. But where does that lead us? Up the dead end of a fractured, broken and divided society.

So, you know Jesus is right: that those who live open hearted, open handed lives are all the richer emotionally, relationally and spiritually. While those who don't grow all the poorer.

But there's a third reason Paul gives, and that's that a generous life is a long life. It's a life that lasts. Verse 9, 'As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.' And Paul is quoting Psalm 112. It's a psalm that describes the life of someone who fears God and delights in his commands. And such a person gives generously to meet the needs of others. And their children flourish. And when everything seems dark around them, they've got light. And they're gracious and merciful. And there's a dignity and stability about them. And when news is bad they find themselves able to keep trusting the Lord instead of crumbling in fear. And you read it and think, I want to be like that.

But at the end of the psalm, that person is contrasted with the wicked person - who lives only for themselves. And, the psalmist says, 'the desire of the wicked will perish' (Ps 112:10) - they want life their way, they want their wants to be met. But when death comes knocking, those desires perish, they disappear like a vapour. Whereas, as Paul quotes here, the righteousness of those who fear God, who give generously and joyfully because they love God, endures forever. Their life lasts.

So, let me ask you, do you want to make your life count and build something that endures? And make a difference that will last, not just in this life but in all eternity? Then ask God to help you cultivate a life of joyful generosity and sacrificial service. And if you're married, do it together. And if you've got kids, get them on board. I mean, you know you can't take your money with you when you die, and that the last clothing you'll wear has no pockets. So invest your stuff now in what *will* go ahead of you: in the meeting of needs, in the care of the poor, in the protection of the persecuted, in the spreading of the gospel.

And as you do, something else happens. It's the fourth reason Paul gives: *It glorifies God.*

Now, another reason we saw last week why the Corinthians had stalled in their giving was that in their culture wealth was viewed as a marker of reputation. The more you had, the more impressive you were. And nothing much has changed, has it? And we can think that to have newer, better, bigger is a sign of a successful life. Of someone who's made it. But is that a vision worth living for? I mean, in the vast expanse of the universe and in the light of eternity, what *are* we? And what are our lives? And to live this life for our own glory is a small and unimpressive vision to live for, isn't it?

And Paul is encouraging these Corinthians to get in on something far greater. Verses 12-13: 'For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints *but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God*. By their approval of this service, *they will glorify God*.' And v14, 'While they long for you *and pray for you*.'

And so, as we give, people's needs are met and they thank God that yet again he's provided for them, so he gets the glory, and they pray for God's blessing on you who gave. Or you give to church, or to missions, and people become Christians and kids and youth and students get discipled, and they start worshipping God and living for his glory, when before they might have turned their backs on him.

But think: how does that cascade of prayer and praise and glory begin? By you and me taking a cupful of our financial resources and pouring it out, and God makes it a waterfall. We sow a seed, and reap a harvest.

So, let me ask you another question: what do you want to see multiply in this world? Because I doubt it's covetousness and greed! And it's not more discord and division. And it's not secular ideologies. I mean, if you're a Christian you want to see thanksgiving and worship and prayer and God's glory multiplying, don't you. So, think seriously about how you can use the resources entrusted to you to see that happen.

Ok, but if you're anything like me, you can know how you should give and why you should give, but what can make you *want* to give?

How and Why We *Can* Give
Look at v13, 'By their approval of this service, they will glorify God *because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ.*'

So the gospel, the good news of what Jesus has done for us, brings about an obedience, Paul says, a submission of our lives to God and his ways. In other words, the gospel has this power to shape you, to change you, to transform the way you see and do life, including the way you see and use money, and to bring all of life increasingly into line with how God would have us live it.

But the question is, what is that power? And why does it have the power to break the power money? Well, look at v14-15, where Paul is saying that the Christians in Jerusalem will 'long for you and pray for you, *because of the surpassing grace of God upon you*. Thanks be to God *for his inexpressible gift*.'

Now, one of Jesus' best known parables is the parable of the Good Samaritan - about a man who was robbed and left for dead in the road. And how a Samaritan was the only person to help him. And that Samaritan took care of him and he gave of his resources to see him restored and his needs met. But the sting in the tail of that parable is not that the people who *didn't* stop to help were all deeply religious. And it's not that the man who *does* help is a despised foreigner and enemy. It's that the man robbed and beaten up in the road, unable to help or save himself is a Jew. He's a believer. He's you or me. And Jesus' point is, you will only be able to be a good neighbour and use your resources to joyfully and generously meet the needs of others, when you first realise it's you who need saving. Its you who lies wounded and broken. It's you who needs a neighbour.

And Jesus came as our neighbour to pick us up from the road. And the inexpressible gift that Paul talks of here, is that Jesus didn't give sparingly, he gave everything. He gave radically and sacrificially and generously while we were still his enemies. And he didn't just sow his finances, he sowed his life. And he died that we might live. And he was lost that we might be found. And if we're to give joyfully, Jesus did it all for the joy set before him. That by his dying and rising he has won for us a righteousness that endures forever.

You see, legalistic religion says, you must obey and give to earn God's favour. But the gospel says, no, because of Jesus, you already have God's overflowing favour. You already stand in grace. And the degree to which you know that, and feel that; the degree to which the good news of the gospel, the generosity of God, has sunk into our hearts, is the degree to which we will be generous.

And as it sinks in we'll increasingly become joyful, generous givers, because God is. And he loves it when he sees his children giving joyfully because we're displaying the family likeness. And he'll see you doing it and go: that's my boy! That's my girl!