Cultivating Generosity
Philippians 4:14-23

So Paul is sat in his prison cell in Rome, and maybe sat beside him he's got Epaphroditus, the man from the church in Philippi who's brought him this gift of money, and who's updated Paul on what's going on in the church there. And Paul's just about to hand him this letter to take back to Philippi, to be read aloud in the church, but before he signs off and stuffs it in the envelope, he wants to thank them for their gift. But as he does so, what's fascinating, it that it is so much more than a passing 'thanks, really grateful for that', it's as if he opens the lid of a treasure box, and gives us a peek at how you and I can cultivate a generous life.

Three points: Giving and Grace; Where the blessing really lies; and the Giving God.

Giving and Grace
Now, if you were here last week, you'll know that Paul closes out the previous section which was about contentment by saying, 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me' (Phil 4:13). I can face want without crumbling, and I can handle wealth without losing my way. I've learnt the secret of deep, inner contentment, whatever I face. And as we saw, that secret is that Christ is always enough, whatever we face.

But the man who's just said that, then begins to close out this letter by saying, v14, 'yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.' Yes I can do all things, face all things, handle all things, because God is my strength, but still I really appreciate the fact that you guys love me and care for me, that you were prepared to share my trouble.

You see, outside, in the city of Rome, Paul has other Christians who are stirring up trouble for him, but these Philippians are sharing in his trouble. And interestingly, that word for sharing comes from the same root word that normally gets translated as fellowship.

Now when you think about Christian *fellowship*, what do you think of? Sharing a nice cup of coffee… ethically sourced of course. Pot-luck lunches with Marinette's stir-fried chicken or one of Mike's fancy South African desserts, and fun times and the church family together. But Paul says there's a kind of fellowship that shares in one another's troubles. That isn't just in it for the good times, but keeps walking alongside in the bad. As Paul puts it to the Galatians, 'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ' (Gal 6:2). What's the law of Christ? That we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love our neighbour as ourself. And we can do that by bearing one another's burdens, by sharing in one another's troubles.

I mean, just ask yourself, because Paul says he can cope with anything life throws at him because God strengthens him, but how does God give us the strength to stand firm in the dark days and not to wobble in the good ones? Isn't it at least in part by giving us one another, to encourage and comfort and challenge and correct us?

I don't know if you remember, but a few weeks back Sim talked about the ministry of turning up. That just by being here, by turning up to church, you encourage people. But whether it's turning up at church, or finding a home group and committing to it, we can think, 'yes but I don't get much out of it', or 'I really don't feel I have much to contribute'. And without even meaning to, our eyes are upon ourselves. But believe it or not, those around you need you: there is this ministry of sharing one another's troubles. Of being Christ's ears and listening, of being his arm around a shoulder to encourage, or being his kick up the pants when we need it.

And these Philippians, with all the stuff they were struggling with, were sharing in Paul's ministry for the gospel now and before, simply because they were willing to give and to send. And so it wasn't just Paul, was it? Sure Paul did the preaching, but then there were the likes of the Philippians, men and women whose names for the most part we will never know, who worked hard to earn money to make ends meet, some of which they then gave away and sent by the hands of Epaphroditus, to support Paul.

And yet we tend to belittle, or at least think that our contribution doesn't amount to much, don't we? I mean you could have been one of these Philippian Christians and hear Paul's gratitude here and how Paul sees your contribution to the offering as sharing with him in his troubles and his ministry and think, 'but I only gave a few denarii, I know I had to work hard for them, and we go without because of them, but it's not exactly a lot', and we could think now: 'but all I do is work Monday to Friday in an office and give money as I can, or I'm only greeting at the door, or serving coffee after church, or praying for my friend sat next to me, or taking part in the members' meeting' and we think it amounts to nothing, and wouldn't be missed, because cutting edge gospel ministry on the front line of missions it ain't. But it's not nothing, is it? And through it the body is working and people are being welcomed and prayed for and cared for and the gospel is slowly advancing and the church grows in breadth and in depth. And Paul counts these normal, everyday Philippians Christians, who 'only' gave their money, as his co-workers for Jesus because they're a part of Jesus' body and they're doing their part.

And the incredible thing is that you and I get to share in that as well. Someone has said that in response to Jesus' great commission, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19), we can either pray, give, or go. We can either give ourselves to prayer that God would send more labourers into the harvest field, to see more people come to know him, or we can give our money to enable that to happen by others going, or we can go ourselves. And Paul and Epaphroditus, they went, but the Philippians, they prayed and they gave.

But what's interesting is that not every church did, did they? Listen to what Paul writes in v15-16: 'And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia [which was their home area], no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.'

So, Paul doesn't take it for granted that a local church, made up of people like us, will make generous giving to see the good news of Jesus spread, their hallmark. It's not like Paul is saying that it's obvious that's how Christians will respond. And yet these guys in Philippi, who had every reason not to, seem to have done exactly that. When other churches weren't giving, they were. So how did they get there? How did this church, that was itself suffering, get to the point of being able to look past their own needs and mobilise themselves and motivate themselves to give sacrificially to support Paul's work in spreading the gospel?

Well, what's interesting about these guys is that they get a mention in another of Paul's letters, his second letter to the Corinthians, where Paul explains exactly what it was that was going on there in Philippi. 2 Corinthians 8: 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches in Macedonia [i.e these Philippians], for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favour of taking part in the relief of the saints… 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 by his poverty might become rich.' (2 Cor 8:1-4, 9).

So, the extraordinary thing is that these Philippians saw it as a favour to be able to give financially outside of themselves. It wasn't that they thought they were doing others a favour by giving, but that a favour was being done to them in their being allowed to give. Now, how did they get there?

Well, look what Paul says. Verse 1: 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that had been given among the churches in Macedonia.' So first off, these Philippians knew something about the grace of God among them. They knew something of God giving to them, that made them want to give to others. Then in verse 2 Paul says 'their abundance of joy' combined with their poverty and formed this wonderful explosive mix of generosity.

So what do these guys know of God's grace, and what has brought them such remarkable joy, that would lead them to handle their money the way they do? Well, Paul tells us in v9: '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 by his poverty might become rich.' So that's it! These guys had realized that Jesus had been incredibly generous to them, they realized that he gave up all that he had, and suffered and died for them, so that they who had nothing might have everything. And if that was how God in Christ had treated them, then they wanted to treat others the same way and give like Jesus had given to them, and they considered it another gift from God to be able to do so.

But what has any of that got to do with you and me? Well it's this: it means that our serving and our giving, our sharing in one another's troubles and in the ministry of the gospel, doesn't need to be grudging, or motivated by guilt, or even by duty, but we can serve and give, out of gratitude and joy when we understand Jesus' generosity to us.

And as if to underscore that, Paul uses a run of accounting metaphors, to explain that when it comes to giving, it's really the giver who gets blessed.

Where The Blessing Really Lies
Verse 17-18: 'Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. I have received full payment, and more.'

Now when I was an undergraduate one of my friends was studying economics, and when as a group of friends we would sit drinking coffee into the small hours, discussing what each of us thought we would end up doing with our lives, and some of us would say we wanted to teach and invest in the next generation, and some were going to be doctors and save lives, but Nick would sort of hang his head in shame and say 'I'm going to be an accountant.' Because, let's face it accountancy, it's not exactly glamourous, is it? But these two verses should set the heart of bean counters everywhere racing.

Because Paul says, 'I'm *not* after your money.' Ok… so an accountant would never say that, 'Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.' And when Paul says that he's using words that would have been used by accountants in his day: 'look, I'm not after your money, I've received full payment, I can stamp your bill 'paid in full', but what I am after is seeing your account, the profit in your account, your credit balance growing and multiplying through compound interest.'

In other words, there is this funny way in which, though it's the Philippians who are being generous and giving money away, it's actually them who are getting all the richer. They're the ones giving sacrificially, but they're also the ones growing more wealthy. Yes, Paul gets blessed and the gospel gets spread by their giving, but the chief beneficiaries of their giving are the Philippians themselves.

Now, how is that, because this isn't the false prosperity gospel is it? I mean this isn't send me 100 dollars and you'll get 1000 back. So what's the profit, the fruit, the return that comes to those for whom generosity becomes a lifestyle?

Well, Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. He said that it is possible to lay up treasure for yourself in heaven, rather than down here with all the vagaries of interest rates and exchange rates and economic downturns. He said that we can use our wealth in such a way that when we die there are going to be people in heaven who will greet us as long lost friends because they were blessed by how we used the money God entrusted to us. So first off, there is this eternal return that comes to the generous.

But it's not just in eternity. Paul opened this letter by letting the Philippians know that he was sure that he who began a good work in them would bring it to completion in their lives, that God was in this ongoing business of transforming them. He told them in chapter 1:11 that his prayer for them was that they would be 'filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.' So this incredible generosity on their part was just another sign that God was continuing his work among them, that Jesus was transforming them, and that as they

continued to live like that, they would know more and more of Jesus' grace and righteousness abounding and multiplying in their lives.

Now you might hear that and think, Ok, that's great. I begin to understand the grace of Jesus to me, that he gave himself for me, and my heart is filled with joy at the thought of that, and it all begins to bubble over in a life of generosity to others, and I begin to see that that results in more blessing, more joy, more of the character of Christ coming back my way. But how come? Why is there this positive feedback loop to generosity? *Why* do I get blessed for simply responding to being blessed?

The Giving God

And Paul switches from an accounting metaphor to a worship metaphor. Verse 18: 'I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.'

Now, maybe that's the ultimate proof that God is not an Englishman. Because we English don't like talking about money, and certainly not in church. But God doesn't see it quite like that, does he? Elsewhere, Paul says that God loves a cheerful giver. There is something about loving, happy, cheerful giving to others, cultivating a life of generosity, that God loves, that he smiles on. There is a way of taking our money and deploying it that brings him pleasure.

Now, a sad truth is that there is this tendency to view what people call secular employment, and especially the making of money, as somehow unspiritual or less spiritual than being a nurse or a teacher or a pastor. And yet when you read this you can begin to see that to create wealth and use that wealth for the relief of suffering and the spread of the gospel is something beautiful and pleasing in God's sight.

And the reason for that, and the reason for this positive feedback loop of generosity, that we get blessed for being blessed and responding to that blessing, is that God is the greatest giver of all. He is the God of all generosity, and when he sees generosity abounding in our lives he sees his own character reflected in his children. You see, when Paul describes Christ's love for us to the church at Ephesus, this is what he writes: 'Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph 5:2). So why does God delight at the sight of generosity, why is it a fragrant offering and a pleasing sacrifice? Because it reflects something of God's own heart, that he is the generous, giving God, that it reflects something of His son's love, who gave himself as the supreme fragrant offering and pleasing sacrifice.

So, when God sees the kind of generosity at work among the Philippians, or in your or my life, he loves to pour in extra grace.

Listen to what Paul says in this famous verse, v19: 'And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.' So God is not tightfisted, is he? He's not like me at home with the girls, 'no girls, you can't have the heating on until you're all wearing thermal underwear, at least one jumper,

and your lips are blue.' God is not a miser. He is the supremely generous father, who promises to supply every need. Not, as someone else has pointed out, every greed, but He will not keep from us anything that we genuinely need. And that includes financial need. It's as if Paul is saying, I can't pay you Philippians back, but my God can. It's as if God sees how we handle wealth and resources and when he sees generosity he says, 'ok, so they've proved they can be trusted with that much, let's give them some more and we'll see what they'll do with that.'

And yet, the truth is that sometimes our needs are deeper than financial, aren't they? Even sometimes what seems to be a financial need runs deeper, doesn't it? It's why throwing money at a problem may often not be the answer, to the real needs underneath. And Paul is saying, yes, and God will meet those needs as well. I mean just think about the themes Paul has covered so far in this letter, the needs of these Philippians and you and me. And Paul is saying, and God will provide everything you need to learn true contentment whether you are brought low or are abounding. He will give you everything you need to find joy in the face of suffering. He will supply everything you need to do your bit to see your relationships healed, to cross the aisle and be reconciled with your brother or sister. He will provide all we need to be united and have the mind of Christ as a church. He will give you all you need to count others more significant than yourself. He will meet every need you have to help you know that to live is Christ and to die is gain. My God, says Paul, will supply every need of yours, material and spiritual, *according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*.

You see, ultimately Jesus is not the bank-teller, handing over the cash. He is the treasure, he is what will meet our every need. And so, in response to Jesus's generosity, him giving himself for us, these Philippians and you and I find joy and grace coming together and overflowing in generosity. And when God sees that, he pours in even more grace, by giving us even more of his riches in Jesus.

Now, how do you respond to that? Does it leave you cold, or does it stir your heart? Because Paul tells us how he responds. At the thought of the overflow of God's generosity in Jesus, Paul breaks into worship: v20: 'To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.' I mean what other response is there? Certainly not religious pride, because any generosity on our part is simply a result of his generosity. Certainly not silence, or the worship equivalent of muted applause, because that would mean we haven't grasped the depths of Christ's giving. No – Paul, in prison, threat of execution hanging over him, every circumstance telling him otherwise, breaks into worship: to God, our gracious, giving, generous, God be glory, forever and ever. Amen.

And do you notice how Paul finally signs off this letter? V21, 'Greet every saint in Christ Jesus' yes, even Eudoia and Syntyche, those two ladies who are struggling, don't shun them, but love them. They too are in Christ Jesus. 'The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.' And then his last words, v23, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.' Because above everything else, that is what these Philippians and you and I need: the grace of Jesus. Sins forgiven, relationships restored, hope for now and eternity, because God is generous and he's the ultimate giver.