

SERIES: Power through Weakness
SERMON: Generating a Spirit of Generosity
SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 8:1-24
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
DATE: January 22, 2006

I want to say a word about where I will be next Sunday and who our guest speaker is going to be. Some of you remember Carlton Harris, who served as our summer intern 25 years ago and who preached here 18 months ago. After 13 years of wonderful ministry in Cleveland, Carlton has been called to pastor the College Avenue Baptist Church in San Diego, one of the largest churches in the Baptist General Conference. He invited me to preach at his installation service there next Sunday, and the Lord's will became very clear as I considered San Diego in January! It was a no-brainer!

It so happened that the same week I was invited to preach there, Ed Aulie called and said he would be here in Wichita this coming week. So with the approval of the Mission Committee I invited Ed to bring the message next Sunday. Ed has had a nearly 30-year history with First Free. I went on our very first mission trip to Chiapas in southern Mexico, along with about a dozen others—Ken Bengtson, John Gee, Harry Castelli, Wendell Force, Irv Penner, Clark Stevens, Bill Fouty, Jeff Amburgey, and others. We met this young, single missionary who seemed more indigenous Indian than American, and whose parents had been missionaries in Chiapas with Wycliffe for 40 years. Today Ed is the husband of Denise and the father of five, but he's still the same incredible pioneer missionary we met years ago. You'll enjoy his stories and his opening of the Scriptures.

I have a special privilege this morning—preaching on a stewardship passage in the course of an expository series! Usually when pastors preach on money, it's because it's Stewardship Sunday; or the church is in the middle of a fund-raising campaign; or there is a crisis of giving. But none of that is true today. I'm preaching on stewardship just because it has come up in the normal course of our study! Hopefully that takes some of the pressure off and enables all of us to look at the topic a little more dispassionately, rather than defensively as we often do.

Before I begin I want to be as honest with you about this passage as I possibly can. You might take that as a "given" (aren't pastors always honest with the Scriptures?), but the reason I feel compelled to mention it is that preachers have often failed to reveal the true context of this particular chapter. They sometimes just adopt the many excellent principles of stewardship found here without mentioning that the principal focus of this passage is not on raising money for buildings or special projects or parachurch ministries or missionaries or even local church budgets. The focus is on giving to the poor, and the particular poor for whom Paul is raising money is a racial minority.

Now I am not suggesting that these stewardship principles apply only when we give to poor racial minorities. Not at all; I think the principles here should have powerful impact on all our giving. But we need to interpret the passage before we apply it, and the correct interpretation is that Paul was collecting money *from* Gentile Christians *for* poverty stricken Jewish believers in Jerusalem—he was not building a new temple or funding a new seminary or even raising money for his own missionary endeavors.

Chapter 8 marks the beginning of a new section in the book of 2 Corinthians, the dominant

theme of which is giving. In chapter 10 he will return once more to some of the personal issues that have already consumed so much of his energy in this book—the defense of his ministry against the attacks of false apostles. But for now his concern is that the church understand her responsibility to give generously and give wisely.

Paul opens this discussion by teaching from example. We all like examples. It is one thing to discuss a topic theoretically or philosophically. It is another to say, “Let me show you an example.” He actually does better than that—he gives us two examples.

Two biblical models for generous giving

The model of the Macedonian churches (1-8). Macedonia was a province in the northern part of Greece, while Corinth was on the southern coast of Greece. Paul had planted churches in the Macedonian cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. These churches had taken up a generous collection for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, and Paul commends them for it. He then uses their example to try to motivate the church in Corinth. Let me stop here and describe the historical situation for you as best I can.

Some thirty years before, the Christian church was born in the city of Jerusalem, as 3,000 individuals were converted in one day after Peter’s great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. A few days later, despite the fact that Peter and John were thrown into jail, the number of converts grew to 5,000 men, besides women and children. Most of these people were apparently Jewish pilgrims from scores of different countries who had come to Jerusalem for the high holy days.

Having found a new faith while on their pilgrimage, many of these travelers decided not to return to their homelands but stayed on in Jerusalem so they could be disciplined and taught by the Apostles. I suspect many of them were subsequently rejected by their families, found it difficult to gain employment, and were relegated to a life of poverty. At first the Apostles and the small Christian community took them in and provided for them, but as persecution increased and as famine hit Palestine, the very existence of the Christian community in Jerusalem was threatened.

The first Jerusalem Council, mentioned in Acts 15, played a major role in resolving some sticky theological questions that threatened to create a schism between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile believers, but it also took a stand in behalf of the poor. As Paul writes in Galatians 2, *“James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do”* (Galatians 2:9, 10).

Paul recognized that true unity in the Church could not be maintained unless the Gentile Christians were willing to help the poverty-stricken and persecuted Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. And that is why Paul included as one of the main goals of his missionary journeys not just evangelism and church planting and leadership development, but also fund raising for the poor in Jerusalem. Paul in effect said to the churches he founded in Greece and Turkey, “You

owe so much to these Jewish Christians in Palestine. Your faith originated with them. Now they are starving and if you don't come to their aid, they will not survive."

I doubt if there is any situation in the church today that is exactly parallel to this, but the closest thing may be the starving Christians in southern Sudan. There is poverty in every country, of course, even in our own city. But when the very survival of a community of Christians is at stake, God calls His people to a generous response. The problem is that there is no easy way to get aid to believers in places like southern Sudan, or North Korea, or Cuba. Even when we try, the Communist governments in those countries do not allow the aid to get to the people who need it. It's a huge dilemma with no easy answers. I honor Chuck Colson for keeping this issue in front of our government and the church.

With that background, let's read about the example of the Macedonian churches, beginning in 8:1:

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

1. The grace of giving is itself a gift from God. I think it's fascinating how the Apostle starts this topic: "we want you to know about the grace that God has *given* the Macedonian churches." This tells me that this virtue of generosity, as well as every other virtue in the Christian life, ultimately has its source in God. If you have unusual intelligence, it's because God gave it to you. If you're extremely good looking, it's because God gave that to you. If you're a great athlete, that's God's gift. And if you have the gift of giving and the resources to give, it's because God has enabled you and motivated you.¹

That does not minimize the generosity; in fact, it enhances it because it shows that Christian generosity is not selfish. Perhaps the term, "selfish generosity" sounds like an oxymoron to you, but much of the so-called generosity we see in the corporate world and among individuals is less than godly. Just think about some of the possible sub-Christian motives for giving: to silence a guilty conscience, to obtain a tax write-off, to gain a reputation for generosity, to gain favor with God, or to avoid judgment. None of those common motives were dominant with the Macedonians; they gave because God gave to them and enabled them to give.

2. Poverty does not prevent generosity. We often tend to think of poverty and generosity as mutually exclusive, but they clearly are not. Look at verse 2: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." This isn't a case of the

rich giving to the poor; rather it is the poor giving to those who were even poorer. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were in dire straits, but so were the Macedonians. In addition to extreme poverty they were going through severe trial. What was the nature of that trial? We don't know, but more than likely they themselves were experiencing persecution, possibly natural disasters, maybe health crises. Each of these generally causes us to retrench our giving, because each makes the future unclear, and we thrive on security. Not so with the Macedonians.

Friends, there's only one way extreme poverty can allow for rich generosity, and that is by divine accounting methods. Human accounting judges generosity on the basis of the amount given; divine accounting judges it on the basis of the sacrifice. The Macedonians knew what sacrificial giving is all about: "For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."

That last phrase is interesting. How can you give beyond your ability? The only way I can think of is that you would make a promise to give something when you didn't know where the resources were coming from, trusting God to provide it. Or perhaps it involves giving money desperately needed for something else, trusting God to provide for that need in His time.

3. Generosity looks at giving as a privilege more than an obligation. The next phrase reads, "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." Isn't that a switch? They aren't responding to high-pressure appeals or gimmicks, nor are they giving with reluctance—they are begging to participate in an offering. I assume from what is said here that Paul didn't even make an appeal to them; they heard about the need in Jerusalem and made an appeal to him: "how can we help?"

There are a few occasions in the Bible where giving literally got out of hand. One of those was when Moses commissioned the work on the tabernacle.

. . . the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled craftsmen who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left their work and said to Moses, "The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the LORD commanded to be done."

Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: "No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary." And so the people were restrained from bringing more, because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work.

That's an unusual problem for a leader to have! And I sure don't mean to imply that this should be a normal occurrence; it wasn't even in biblical times. But I do think it should be normal for us to view giving as a privilege more than an obligation.

4. Generosity starts with the giving of oneself. Verse 5: "And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will." Paul doesn't say what he *did* expect the Macedonians to do, but he does indicate his surprise that they gave themselves before they gave their money. Usually it's the other way around. Jesus even said that "where your money is, there will your heart be also" implying that our heart generally

follows our money, which is true. But in this case the Macedonians saw to it that their hearts were right with God and they were serving Him faithfully, and their giving became a natural outflow from that.

They also gave themselves to Paul and the other church leaders. That is, by the way, in keeping with God's will. If you are truly dedicated to God, you will be dedicated to His church, because the Church is the Body of Christ here on earth. Every once in a while I meet someone who claims to be a Jesus-follower, a God-worshiper, but who has no visible connection with the Church. Generally if you watch that person over any period of time you discover some major gaps between profession and reality. God did not create us to go it alone; he put us into relationship with other believers because we need them and they need us.

5. Excellence in giving is as important as excellence in other spiritual graces. If I were to ask you whether you thought it was important for a teacher to do his best, to work hard, to study hard in order to be the best possible teacher he or she could be, you would say, "Of course." How about for an administrator? Is there any excuse for shoddy, half-hearted administration? Don't we expect administrators to go to seminars to hone their skills? Of course. But excellence is just as important in respect to the gift of giving. Look at verse 7: "Just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving."

Well, how do you excel in giving? Not just by giving more, but by studying the subject of stewardship, by going to seminars, by getting into small groups that hold you accountable, by becoming aware of scams you need to avoid. This past fall I took a Crown Financial Bible Study along with Jan and the last of our pastoral staff who hadn't taken one before. I didn't take it because I was up to my eyeballs in debt, because we don't have any consumer debt and haven't had for years. I took it because I need to be reminded of the principles in God's Word about stewardship and I want practical help in how to do better.

In the coming semester of the Lay Bible Institute we are offering two different classes that relate to our stewardship lives. In addition, in March we are planning to offer a seminar on how to include God in our estate planning. The wealth that is tied up in estates in our country is humongous, and the Lord's work is being remembered in just a tiny fraction of those estates. And this is in spite of the fact that the government has created tax provisions that enable a person to give through his or her estate without threatening a generous inheritance to one's children. If we are going to excel in giving, we need to study it, learn all we can, be creative, and encourage one another.

Now Paul offers us a second example of generous giving. He has talked about the Macedonian churches, but now he turns to the example of Jesus Himself.

The model of Jesus Christ (9) "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." I'm not sure this is a model to follow as much as it is a model to admire, for

there's no way we *can* give like Jesus gave. He gave everything, and the gift of His life made those who put their trust in Him rich for eternity. We cannot emulate that. But I think it is important that we understand it and revel in it. Three things are reiterated about the generosity of Jesus:

1. He was rich. And was He ever! He was the creator, the ruler, and the sustainer of the entire universe. He lived in the glorious splendor of heaven with His Father, enjoying the worship of the angels and the OT saints. And then His Father asked Him to take on an assignment, an assignment that would make the richest person in the universe the absolute poorest. And He said yes.

2. He became poor. He was born of a poverty stricken couple. He was forced into exile when he was just a baby. He grew up in the backwater town of Nazareth with little formal education and even less societal recognition. He never owned a home, never had any savings, never had a wife or kids of his own, didn't leave an estate. And why did He agree to this?

3. So that we might become rich. Jesus had one primary objective in going from inestimable riches to abject poverty—to provide for the eternal welfare and inheritance of His spiritual children.

As we think through these two biblical models for generous giving, what should they say to us? I can't help but come to the conclusion that we must be concerned about the poor—the financially poor as the Macedonians were, and the spiritually poor as Jesus was. My heart is warmed when I hear about the \$20 million in Katrina relief given by our Evangelical Free Churches this Fall, or the millions more that went to tsunami relief earlier in the year. This week in Minneapolis I heard reports about how that \$20 million is being administered by our Free Churches in New Orleans—how they are rebuilding neighborhoods around their churches far faster than the government or the social services are doing. But there are those we have an even greater obligation to help—our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering because of persecution. The bottom line is that we need to have a much greater degree of concern than most of us do for the persecuted church.

I speak to myself this morning, as much as to you. We annually recognize the persecuted church on a Sunday in October, but usually it merits a mention in the prayer sheet and perhaps a line item in the pastoral prayer. That doesn't cut it. Friends, there are fellow evangelicals who are suffering for their faith, and if we don't know who they are or where they are, then we need to find out. I think they are the ones Jesus was talking about when he said that if we give a cup of cold water to the least of these, we give it to Him, and if we don't give it to them, we deny it to Him.

Now again I don't want to suggest this morning that everything Paul has said about generous giving applies only to giving to the poor or to the persecuted church. I repeat again that there are practical principles in this chapter that apply to all of our giving. Let me now share some additional principles with you that come from this chapter.

Practical principles of generosity (8:10-9:5)

1. God expects us to complete commitments we make. (10-11) Paul continues his conversation about giving in the middle of verse 10: “Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.” Do you sense the fist in the velvet glove here? He praises them even while he gently rebukes them. Of all the churches Paul visited, the Corinthians were the most eager to start a fund for the Jerusalem believers. They were the first in time and the first in desire. But, as we suggested, in the meantime Paul’s detractors had come to power, and probably because the fund had been started by him, they had quit giving to it. Now that the congregation has repented of their negative attitude toward him, he stresses that they need to repent of the lapse in their giving as well.

All of us have been in situations where we felt really burdened by some need, and perhaps we made a commitment to do something about it. Later, when the emotions were no longer stirred or perhaps we got upset about something, we were tempted to forget our commitment. We need to be careful not to make commitments hastily, but when we make them, we need to keep them. God does not look lightly upon vows that are broken.

2. Generosity is judged not by quantity but by attitude. (12) “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” Again we find that heaven’s accounting system is totally different from earth’s. No one can say legitimately, “I can’t be generous, because I don’t have the resources to be generous.” Generosity is gauged not by the size of the gift but by the size of the heart. The widow with two mites proves that beyond the shadow of a doubt.

3. Equality and mutuality are legitimate goals of generous benevolence. (13-15)

“Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: ‘He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.’”

Now this is a principle of stewardship that I think we give scant attention to today—probably because it is very foreign to our American thought processes. I confess that I’m not even sure how to apply it. Clearly, when giving to the poor, the goal is not to make the rich poor or the poor rich. The goal is some kind of equality.

We who have been raised in capitalism tend to bristle at such passages and do our best to massage them to say something else. But the fact is that there is an ideal of economic equality presented in this passage and several others. It’s not required, for Paul clearly says, “our desire is . . . ,” not “I command you.” And the Bible never goes as far as humanistic socialism goes in denouncing private ownership or confiscating personal property or eliminating personal freedoms. But we should not ignore the ideal that the Christian community not be made up of

two distinct classes—the have’s and the have-not’s.

4. The way leaders handle money is as important as how believers give it. (16-24)

I thank 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 own 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 men.

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 fellow 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.

I don’t think it’s essential that we go through this section verse by verse, because I think the general theme is quite obvious—Paul not only wants to handle the generous giving of the Corinthian church in a godly way; he also wants to avoid any criticism on the matter. These are two separate issues, but both are important. Being honest is the first and primary issue; but if you are honest, it’s also important to appear honest, i.e. to avoid any appearance of evil, especially in respect to financial propriety.

The process starts with Paul making sure that there is accountability. No one person, no matter how reliable he might be—no, not even the Apostle himself—is going to be allowed to handle or administrate this fund by himself. I think there are two reasons for this—(1) it protects the funds, and (2) it protects the reputations of those involved. Notice also that the one chosen to go along with Paul and Titus to guard these funds is one who “is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel.” Furthermore, Paul doesn’t choose this person by himself, verse 19: “What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering.”

All of this demonstrates what he claims in verse 21, namely that he is “taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.” I have known religious leaders who were probably very honest individuals, but they were disdainful of human oversight. Their attitude was, “I’m responsible to God alone for what I do, so mind your own business.” Here is one who was an Apostle, and *he* didn’t take that attitude. He invited scrutiny; he sought oversight.

I’ve been in the ministry for well over 30 years, and I’ve never had anyone question my financial integrity. One of the reasons is because I took the advice of a wise counselor when I first began—never handle the church’s money. I’ve had people hand me offering envelopes and say, “I forgot to put this in the offering; will you take care it for me and make sure it gets to the right place?” I

tell them, “No, I’d rather not. Let’s find a trustee and you can give it to them.”

We live in a financially complicated world today, and more than ever we need accountability. For Christians organizations today, thankfully, there is a body called “The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability,” the ECFA. Our denomination is the EFCA, but this is the ECFA, but the EFCA belongs to the ECFA, and every Christian organization of any size ought to. In fact, I generally will not give money to Christian organizations that do not belong. The ECFA provides financial standards that are uniform and requires auditing practices that are reliable.

Conclusion: Friends, you can look back at the principles in your outline and examine your own life according to them. How do you stack up? When do you plan to correct the deficiencies? When do you plan to excel in giving?

i. Now you can draw a false conclusion from that if you’re not careful: you can be tempted to say, “God hasn’t given me the gift of giving, so I’m exempt from giving.” There are certain responsibilities God has laid upon every believer but at the same time He has gifted certain ones with special ability in that area. Every believer is challenged to share his faith, but some have the gift of evangelism. Every believer is to help his brother and sister in Christ when in need, but some have the gift of helps. God enabled the Macedonians to give way beyond the norm, but that doesn’t mean the rest of us are exempt. In fact, the very fact that Paul uses them as an example to motivate us demonstrates that the responsibility to give is universal.