

Money, Jesus, and Me

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

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For the past two weekends, we have studied Christian generosity as displayed by Mary and the extravagant gift of her heart and her expensive perfume. We asked the question, *Was the perfume worth more or less after she poured it out?* The reason this is compelling is that perfume is one of those commodities that instantly loses material value. Judas was there and clearly thought it was worth nothing after it was poured out and was appalled that she would do such a thing. However, this is not the way God looks at our offerings to him. Jesus urges us to lay up treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19), be rich toward God (Luke 12:13ff), and trust in his promise to reward our sacrifices for him (Matthew 19:27ff.).

Clearly Judas and Jesus value things very differently. From Judas' perspective, Mary's gift was worth nothing after it was poured out. From Jesus' perspective, it was worth much, much more. From Judas' perspective, worth is merely material and financial. From Jesus' perspective, worth is whatever it is worth in eternity. Judas and Jesus. We were challenged to ask who do we more resemble in the way we value and use our possessions. We can know by comparing ourselves to people like Mary in the story. Her extravagant love for Christ produced generous gifts to him as well. Judas loved money. Mary loved Jesus.

Today's message is not trying to turn Judases into Marys. This is a message for Mary types who have the desire to be generous to God but need help knowing how to live a lifestyle that allows for generosity.

"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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 free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. (2 Corinthians 8:1-9)

Let's do a brief exposition of this passage. Paul writes to the wealthy Corinthians about a fundraiser that he is leading to collect funds for suffering Christians in Jerusalem. He begins by telling them about the generous gift the Macedonian churches had collected. What is noteworthy is that the Macedonians were extremely poor (i.e. their "test of affliction" and "extreme poverty"). Yet they had a kind of wealth which is called in verse 2, a "wealth of generosity." So he is holding these poor, but rich-with-generosity Christians up as a model to the wealthy, but lacking-generosity Corinthian Christians. What were these Macedonians like?

<i>Gave out of their poverty</i>	8:2
<i>Gave beyond their means</i>	8:3
<i>Freely</i>	8:3
<i>Begged to give</i>	8:3

If you're looking for what generosity looks like, those are three or four qualities to start with. You don't have to be rich to be a generous giver because gifts are measured by God

on a curve, based on what we have (8:12). They gave sacrificially. Happily. Urgently. In these Macedonian churches, the offering was the highlight of the service.

It reminds me of a church service I attended in Sierra Leone, Africa. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries of the world. In this church service, they announced the offering and the offering baskets were at the front of the church. My memory is of them dancing down the aisles and placing their offerings in the plate. (I apologize for the blurriness of the photo.)



You might say, "they like to dance!" but could it be that they like to give even out of their poverty?

We could use a little more dancing around here...that's not our culture to dance during offerings. It may not be your culture to give much either and maybe those two go together. Perhaps before I die or retire, could we have one African type offering here? I'll give you plenty of time to work on your dance moves for the offering. I can see the local dance studios..."Are you learning to dance for a wedding or event?"

"No, the offering at church..."

"But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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 Corinthians 8:7-9)

The Apostle lists qualities of spiritual maturity that everyone is on board with: faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love. Even Judas types would likely agree that these are all important measures. These are embraced and sought after by any serious Christian. But then Paul adds this one – giving, *see that you excel in this act of grace also*. Right up there with faith and knowledge is giving. **There is no spiritual maturity without generosity.** *Why, that's preposterous! Don't question my spirituality just because I hoard my resources*

and love money! I'm not, the Holy Spirit is. You may say, "How can that be? Aren't faith and finances mutually exclusive?"

This is where many people stumble and why Jesus had so much to say about money. What is money really? Money is an indication of value. It is paper or coin or a digital number with your financial institution. That's all it is. It has value because of what it can buy or secure. Therefore, how we use money and where we invest it is not a statement of money's value, but of what we value. That is why Jesus has so much to say about it. What does it mean to be a Christian if not that we value our salvation in Christ as worth more than anything else?

That's why spiritual maturity always includes financial generosity. It has to. For the reason Paul points out in verse 9. *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.*"

Paul's argument for Corinthian generosity is Christo-centric. *For you know...* if you are a Christian, you know this story. *Christ, though he was rich.* Pre-existent Christ, pre-Incarnation, pre-Christmas was God in eternity past. What was his experience as God? Paul says, *he was rich.* How rich is God? It's almost a silly question because we're asking a material question of a spiritual being. He is God. "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it." (Psalm 19:1, NIV) The nuance here is that "rich" when applied to Christ is less about his net worth and more about the richness of his experience as God. His fullness. His glory. His greatness. In eternity past, these were his in infinite supply.

Yet in spite of this infinitely joyous eternal experience, *"yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."* Before we admire Mary too much, what Jesus gave to us was infinitely greater than Mary because of what he gave up. The richest became the poorest. Poverty is a reference to the impoverishment of his experience as a human on earth (when compared to his heavenly experience) – highlighted, of course, by his sufferings for us on the cross.

Has there ever been a more extravagant gift than what Christ gave? Never. And to think who he did it for, "yet for your sake he became poor." He did this for us and our salvation. To give us the experience that was his before he came. He gives us eternal life and eternal bliss. As the old song says, *He gave his life – what more could he give?...O how he loves you and me! ("O How He Loves You and Me!" – Kurt Kaiser)* So Paul's whole argument for why the Corinthians should be generous to Christ is built on Christ's generosity to us.

The reason there is no spiritual maturity without generosity is that a spiritually mature person embraces the gospel of Christ's self-giving and trembles at it. With the immature there is little trembling at Christ's humiliation and so there is no compulsion to follow his example; and since his example is tremendous generosity, the spiritually immature won't follow suit. Not yet. Not till they mature.

By the way, this is one reason I support our church's stand and Constitution that our church leaders must be givers. Just because people are generous to God's work doesn't mean they're mature. However, there is no maturity without generosity. Further, if someone doesn't have the faith to trust God in their personal finances, do they have the necessary faith to lead a ministry in our church? No. *"If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?"* (Luke 16:11)

That is what Paul is urging these Corinthian Christians. Look at the example of the Macedonians. Look at the example of Christ. Grow and excel in the grace of giving.

A Basic Guide to the Generous Life

Simplicity in life

By this I don't mean living in a commune and only eating vegetables out of your garden. What I do mean is the simple reality that to be generous, I have to have something to be generous with. The only way I can have something to be generous with is if I live sufficiently below my income to create a "generosity margin." In our materialistic culture this requires self-control because there are a million opportunities to spend away my generosity.

God has given the Christian a great asset in this battle. Galatians 5:23 describes qualities of the Spirit-filled Christian known as the fruit of the Spirit. One of those qualities is self-control. The more the Spirit's power is active in our lives, the more control we have over our appetites, desires, and decisions. The testimony we heard tonight was of a couple exercising self-control and living beneath their means which produces a generosity margin.

Too many Christians make unwise financial and purchasing decisions which keep them from having anything to give to God. This is where Financial Peace University or Crown Ministries and other programs like it are so helpful to right the financial ship, get out of unnecessary debt and get your financial house in order. I commend it to you. It may be one of the most spiritual decisions you ever make.

Further, God's people should be vigorous workers and actively steward the earth in ways that often will produce resources to be generous with. This is the old Puritan work ethic which by the common grace of God, can and often does, prosper us. Why we want to prosper and what we do with it is the issue.

Simplicity in life is asking the question in the midst of a spending or investment decision, *Will this hinder our ability to give to God with generosity?* This is not to say that spending money is wrong or having quality things is necessarily wrong. I'm wearing a nicer watch and this shirt is brand new. I got both at major discounts because that's how I roll. I like quality things and were not talking about neo-monasticism here. However, if the car I drive or the house I live in or the vacation that I take or the designer clothes I wear or the debt I commit to impede me from having financial margin to honor God with my money, I need the self-control to say no. We're going to come to different conclusions on the specifics of that and we need to love each other through those differences. This is just the simple fact that generosity requires me to have something to be generous with and the lifestyle I live will determine what I have to give.

Get started with 10-10-80

I hesitate to do this because legalists will seize on this as a measure of their own spirituality or others will let this be their conscience guide when God may want to lead you to something greater. However, we have new Christians and people beginning their spiritual walk who are like, *How do I get started?* Here is a place to start and who knows where God will lead you?

10 → Tithe ("first fruit")

The word "tithe" may be a new one to you. It simply means "tenth." It is a principle throughout the Old Testament primarily, first mentioned in Genesis 14:17ff. with Abraham's

tithe to Melchizedek. God made it a law for the Israelites in Leviticus 27:30 along with many other gifts to the priesthood and temple and feasts.

The "tithe" was the first 10% of the crops given to God. It became an indication of the people's spiritual temperature as in the prophet Amos' day where the people gave tithes but weren't happy about it. In Malachi's day, they stopped altogether (Malachi 3:8-10).

When we get to the New Testament, Jesus gives one implicit endorsement of tithing in Matthew 23:23 but the emphasis in the New Covenant is on "grace-giving." Before you breathe a sigh of relief, grace giving is exemplified by the Macedonians. We've seen they gave "beyond their ability," in spite of financial hardship, and "begged" to give more. Some of you are like, "I think I'll just do the tithe, thank you."

Here is the point. Tithing gives us a helpful starting point, but it's not intended to be an ending point. For a new Christian, it's a great place to start. But for mature believers, the real question is what does grace-giving look like for us and are we living a lifestyle that is rich toward God? It's not how much must I give to meet the minimum standard, but am I laying up treasure in heaven? Am I rich toward God? Am I a Mary or a Judas?

10-80

Most experts would suggest taking your next **10%** and putting it in savings. We live off the **80%**, but realize that the 80% is God's as well. It's simple and kind of training wheels stuff, but many of us are getting ready for taxes and thinking about our finances from last year. How did you do in 2011? Maturity and generosity? Judas or Mary? Your ratios may be more generous and that is great. But before we are too impressed with ourselves, let's remember what Jesus' ratio was:

100-0-0 – Jesus' giving ratio

You would rightly say this is unrealistic and we need to be prudent and wise managing our money and saving and investing and all the rest. I think you're right and I try to live that way myself. However, shouldn't Jesus' ratio inspire us toward greater and greater generosity?

A final word. Some of you may be thinking, *Is Steve talking about this because we are raising money for Mission Them?* The answer is, yes. If you wonder if this is appropriate or not, look back to 2 Corinthians. Was Paul taking up a collection? Yes. What did he do? He talked to the Corinthians about generosity. In his case, the monies were for suffering Christians in the city of Jerusalem. Was that a noble cause and worth talking about generosity? Absolutely. In our case, we are raising money to reach the 500,000 people in our Jerusalem who have no discernable faith in Christ and who apart from that are on a path to hell. Is that a noble cause and worth talking with God's people about generosity? I think so and I will be giving above my normal giving toward this. Your leaders also think so and will be giving to it.

We are asking you to pray about what God would have you do for this. Our ongoing ministries are funded through the general fund and those needs are immediate and real. *Mission Them* is big exciting vision stuff. Folks, you realize that other than necessary equipment updates in the auditorium, we're essentially giving everything we raise away for people's eternity that we don't even know yet. We're not adding on luxurious suites here. It's not Mission Us. It is *Mission Them*. This is for them and for God.

And if a fruit of *Mission Them* is all of us taking a fresh look at our ratios and our lifestyles and our giving, and if that look moves us to generosity, would it not also be moving our church toward maturity? Wouldn't God be pleased with that?

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