

"U.P. (#3): GENEROSITY"

(2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

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--I--

1. Medical researchers have recently classified a new, very serious disease that's actually been around for many years, but has recently become especially acute in today's culture -- it's called "*Cirrhosis of the Giver*".¹

A--One medical journal defines it as... "*An acute condition that renders a patient's hands immobile when he or she is called on to move them in the direction of their wallet or purse, and from there to the offering plate in church. This strange malady is clinically unobservable in such surroundings as the country club, supermarket, clothing store, or restaurant. Some try to use a fake remedy, pointing out to patients that income tax deductions can be claimed. But the best therapy -- and that which leads to a sure and lasting cure -- is to get the individual's heart right with God, [for] this affliction is actually a symptom of a more basic need of the soul.*"²

B--Now, we can certainly chuckle at this a little, but the sad truth is that -- even if it's not an actual *medical* disease -- this ailment *does*, in fact, exist as an actual *spiritual* disease that affects many people (including many "church-folks")!

- 2 That's why today, as we wrap up our stewardship series "U.P.", I want to focus on one final tool that can not only help us to *avoid* "Cirrhosis of the Giver," but more importantly, can help *Unleash* our *Potential* as followers of Christ -- ...

A--...It's the power (and paradox) of "GENEROSITY" -- of learning the value and practice of personal surrender *not* just of our *money*, but also of *ourselves* and all our *possessions* to God: ...to discover the irony that the more we *give up*, the more we will *have*; that the more *generous* we are, the more *victorious* we'll be in our faith!

B--We actually find this paradox described by the apostle Paul in today's scripture from 2 Corinthians 9:6-8. In those verses, Paul says this...

"6 What I mean is this: the one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop. 7 Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. 8 God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work."

C--Now, here we find Paul describing a number *motivations for generosity*. Let me share just a few of them.³

--II--

3. First, we find what I'm calling "***Need-Generosity***" – generosity motivated by the desire to meet specific financial, physical, or spiritual needs.

A--For example, in Verse 8 Paul says that "*You will have everything you need always... to provide more than enough for every kind of good work.*"

B--In other words, God provides *our* needs *precisely* so that we can turn around and use what we've been given to meet the needs of *others*.⁴

C--And when we give to meet specific needs in and through our church, we're really partnering with God to accomplish HIS will here on earth.⁵

D--When my wife and I agreed to sponsor a child through Compassion International, or through our annual "Operation Christmas Child" or "Angel Tree" ministry, or when we've helped at an O'Rourke Ministry mission day at Eastgate community, or go on a mission trip to El Salvador (like we'll be doing next summer), we feel good because we know we're helping others in need -- that's "*Need-Generosity*."

4. Yet, in today's passage we also read about something I'm calling "***Seed-Generosity***" – generosity motivated by the desire to make a statement of faith/trust in God.

A--Verse 6 says that "*The one who sows a small number of seeds will also reap a small crop, and the one who sows a generous amount of seeds will also reap a generous crop.*"⁶ -- this is where we get the phrase "*You reap what you sow.*"⁷

B--When you and I plant financial "seeds" in God's work on earth, there are blessings that result from it (not always *material* blessings, but *spiritual* ones, for sure!)⁸

C--And while we do this, Verse 8 says that *our* needs will be taken care of as we're being faithful in helping others: "*God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace.*"

1--Author John Bunyon, in his medieval classic Pilgrim's Progress, wrote this in describing his main character named "Christian," "*A man there was, and they called him mad; the more he gave, the more he had.*"

2--You know, there have been many times in my life when I felt God nudge me to give to some cause or project, not just because it helped someone (even though it did), but simply because God *prompted* me to do it, and I wanted to obey!

3--And when I did, I found that He was always generous back -- I've actually never met anyone who went out on a limb to plant financial seeds of faith for God who's ended up falling into serious need -- this is "*Seed-Generosity*."

5. Yet, unfortunately there's also a motivation in Verse 7 that I call "**Grudge-Generosity**"—generosity that comes from constraint; a sense that "*I have to, even though I don't want to!*" (Vs. 7: CEB calls it giving "*with hesitation*"; but NRSV calls it "*reluctant*" giving).

A--It's generosity that's begrudging, and joyless, and often full of resentment.

B--We probably all know what I'm talking about: ...its when we give, but with no real sense of *joy* in our giving, and no real expectation that it'll result in *blessing* -- we merely give because we think it will makes us look good, or because it makes us feel better about ourselves, or perhaps because someone else makes us do it!

6. And then, Verse 7 also implies a giving-motivation that I call "**Duty-Generosity**"—generosity that comes from a sense of obligation -- when we give "*under pressure / under compulsion.*"

A--And we all probably know I'm talking about here, too -- it's when we give our time or money to our church or a cause NOT because our *heart* is in it, but because we think "*I OUGHT to*" or "*I'm SUPPOSED to!*"

B--As a result, our giving is often filled with a sense of reluctance and pressure -- of trying to live up to the demands/expectations of *others* (or *ourselves*); perhaps even a feeling that we won't "measure up" or "fit in" *unless* we "fulfill their financial duty."

C--Obviously, this motivation is better than "grudge-generosity," but there's still no joy or life in it because our giving is a hard *duty*; a "cross which we have to bear" in order to be a "good Christian" or a "good human being" -- that's "*Duty Giving.*"

7. Yet, I want us to notice that these verses also describe perhaps the most *noble* of all motivations for giving: something I'm calling "**JOY-GENEROSITY.**"

A--Verse 7 says that "*God loves a cheerful giver;*" and (while we didn't read it) Verses 11-12 talk about how giving and generosity "*produce[s] thanksgiving to God.*"

B--In other words, Paul commends giving to us NOT because God *needs* our money or our time or our talent, but as a way for *us* to express the joy and satisfaction of our love, worship, and thanks to/for *Him!* ⁹

1--Joy-giving, you see, comes from a heart filled with *love* and *joy* for who God IS and what He DOES for us.

2--Instead of giving because we "*have to*" or "*ought to,*" we give because we *WANT to* -- we want our giving to reflect the joy we have in loving the Lord.

C--Do you remember the car bumper sticker that says "*If you love Jesus, honk*"? Well, I once saw a variation of it that put it this way: "*If you love Jesus, tithe; anyone can honk*" -- if we really love God/Jesus, then our giving will show it by our generosity... by the ways that we are generous with our time, our talents, and (yes) our finances. ¹⁰

D--In fact, that's exactly why my wife and I *tithe* (i.e., give 10% of our gross income back to God's church here at Cornerstone) -- because through it, we want to tell God how much we love Him. ¹¹

E--And the amazing thing is that when we've done this faithfully and regularly over the years, not have we experienced God's *joy* as a benefit, but all of the *other positive* motivations for generosity are also fulfilled: ...

1--...The needy are fed and clothed; church buildings are built and paid off; missionaries and "faith-seed" projects are supported; and church staff, ministries, and programs are funded...

2--...NOT because we "have to," or "need to," or want something in return, but simply because we love God and want to show it by our own generosity. ¹²

--III--

8. So, **what motivates YOU to be generous**... not just with your money, but also with other resources like your time and talents? Is it merely to meet a *need*? Or to plant a *seed*? Do you do it *grudgingly*? or out of a sense of *duty*?

A--OR... are you generous to show the *joy* of your love *for* and thanks *to* God? (In fact, another word for "*Joy-Generosity/Giving*" might simply be... "*Thanks-giving*"!) ¹³

B--You see, if we want to truly *unleash* our *potential* as followers of Christ, we have to learn the value and practice of being GENEROUS -- of surrendering who WE are and what WE have to GOD, for HIS purposes and plans.

C--And when we do that, not only so we avoid the spiritual disease "Cirrhosis of the Giver," but (more importantly) we discover the true JOY of generosity!

9. [INTRODUCE OUR FINANCE CHAIRPERSON to offer invitation and instructions about sharing U.P. financial stewardship responses ALTAR or ONLINE...]
10. [PRAY ER] or all the U.P. commitments that people are making and the generosity (and giving that goes with them) to reflect our love for God...]

ENDNOTES:

¹ It's existed at least since the 1st-century A.D. where it was discovered in the biblical husband-wife team of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), who were infamous for their inability to give to the work of God.

² Taken from Michael P. Green, "Giving," Illustrations For Biblical Preaching (Baker Group, 1989).

³ These are taken generally from several types listed in a devotional from The Upper Room devotional guide, June 15, 2004: (1) Need giving; (2) Deed giving; and (3) Seed giving. After extensive research, Christian financial consultant Herb Miller also identified similar purposes for giving. It... (1) Puts God first; (2) Worships God; (3) Expresses thankfulness to God; (4) Acts As God's Steward; (5) Supports God's Long-Range Goals; (6) Motivates Others to Put God First; (7) Giving Must Include Helping People In Need; and (8) Giving Must Include Right Living [Herb Miller, Full Disclosure: Everything the Bible Says About Financial Giving (Discipleship Resources, 2003), Part 1: "Why Should We Give?", pp. 9-64].

It's helpful to understand the *context* of today's scripture as we do this: The Christians in the church in Jerusalem are in dire financial need, and as a gesture of compassion and solidarity with them, the apostle Paul has asked Christians throughout the Roman Empire to take up a love offering for them. But the Gentile Christians in the Greek city of Corinth not only had no great love for the Jewish city of Jerusalem, but were experiencing difficulties themselves -- "*Why should we help them when we've got problems of our own?*" they said. So here in Chapter 9, Paul is writing to convince them of the merits and value of financial giving to the Jerusalem church through this offering that they don't want to do.

⁴ "*God gives to us in order that we may give to others*" (The Upper Room devotional, June 15, 2004).

⁵ The idea here is that by surrendering ourselves and our possessions to God's use, we become partners in God's work in our world and in building His kingdom here on earth. "*Stewardship is a partnership with God. We cannot 'give' anything to God [He owns it all already], but we can 'fulfill' God by using our gifts wisely and sharing with others*" ["Stewardship And You" Scriptographic pamphlet (Channing Bete Co., 1974), p. 15]. As an example of this partnership, read Exodus 35 and 1 Chronicles 28-29, where God used the people of Israel to build places of worship so that His people (the "stewards") could have a partnership with Him (the "owner") in the process of salvation for the world.

⁶ Verse 10 even indicates that God himself provides the seed for us to sow, so that He can, in turn, bless us with an abundant harvest. God, then, is both the source of the seed and the abundant harvest. But it's up to us to do the planting so that that harvest can occur.

⁷ "*Giving is like sowing seed. The [one] who sows with a sparing hand cannot hope for anything but a meager harvest, but the [one] who sows with a generous hand will in due time reap a generous return*" [William Barclay, Barclay Commentary on the Bible: The Letters to the Corinthians, p. 261].

⁸ Read Verse 11. "*The [Bible] does not promise the wealth of things; but it does promise the wealth of the heart & spirit*" (William Barclay, Barclay Commentary on the Bible: The Letters to the Corinthians, p. 261).

⁹ Remember that the Bible teaches that ALL we have belongs to God anyway; we are all merely caretakers ("stewards/managers") of it.

¹⁰ "*You can sing all you want about how you love Jesus, you can have crocodile tears in your eyes, but the consecration that doesn't reach your purse has not reached your heart.*" (Pastor and Author Rev. Adrian Rogers at https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/64616.Adrian_Rogers#).

¹¹ And it's why -- when we want to give to a special offering of some sort -- we give to that special offering through an "over an above" gift (i.e., we only give to special offerings over and above our 10% tithe).

¹² "A Christian steward serves God out of love and gratitude for [their] gifts, knowing that it is not how much we have but what we DO with what we have that is important" ["Stewardship And You" Scriptographic pamphlet, (Channing Bete Co., 1974), p. 3].

A simple story may serve to illustrate the importance of this purpose/motivation for giving: As the ushers came down the aisle bearing offering plates, Susie asked her mother what was happening. "They are taking up the offering, Susie, and when they get here you can put your quarter in the offering plate," her mother answered. Anxiously, Susie replied, "But this quarter is for Jesus." The mother explained how, by putting her nickel in the plate she was giving it to Jesus, because of the many ways in which her gift would be used to spread God's Word. As the plate came down her row, Susie carefully placed her quarter in the plate, then turned to her mother and asked, "If that money is for Jesus, why wasn't there more in the plate?"

When we acknowledge God's ownership of all we have (including our money), every spending decision becomes a spiritual decision. No longer do we ask, "Lord what do You want me to do with my money?" The question instead becomes, "Lord what do You want me to do with Your money?"

¹³ There's actually another motivation for giving that we find implied in today's scripture: something I call "Lead-Generosity" -- generosity as a form of witness and testimony about the priority of God in one's life. It means that when we give, it not only helps us to "put God first" in our OWN life, but leads others (by example) to do the same in THEIR lives, as well. This is implied in today's text by virtue of the fact that the Corinthians' taking of this offering for a church they really don't care much about is a sign of their own faith/trust in God. It is *Christian leadership by example*, which often asks us to do things above and beyond our comfort level -- above and beyond merely "what I want".