

## First to the Lord

“First to the Lord – In Everything!”

2 Corinthians 8:1-8

Mark Vroegop

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8 We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 2 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. 3 For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. 6 Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 7 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 (2 Cor 8:1-7).

Last Sunday was a very important and historic moment in the history of our church. For over a year now we have been prayerfully and carefully considering some short-term and long-term solutions to our space needs. Last week we had over 3,400 people here, and we are already making plans for what we are going to do on Easter Sunday where we anticipate 4,500 people coming to worship with us. In a few weeks we'll be adding some modulars in the East parking lot to make even more room in Worship2. That will help, but it will not solve our challenges.

Our proposed long-term solution is captured in a brochure that we have called our “Mission Expansion Project,” a 19 million dollar expansion and renovation project. Our funding goal from this project is a minimum of 14 million dollars through 3 year commitments and church budget contributions. On Sunday night the congregation considered a resolution from our Elders to enter into a 40 day season of prayer and commitment. The congregational approved this resolution with a 99% affirmative vote. On March 14, our 40 days of discovery will end as we have a collection of commitment cards. Then we will have a final congregational meeting on March 21 to consider moving into construction. Today we launch into that 40 days season of prayer and discovery.

### **40 Days of Prayer and Discovery**

Our aim during the next 40 days is to earnestly seek the will of God for our church. The reality is that we have to do something because of the people and ministry opportunities that the Lord is sending our direction. We've worked hard to apply the best human and spiritual wisdom that we have, but we still need to know if this next step is what the Lord wants for us to do. Our

Elders believe that this is the building that we need and a building that we can afford, but we need your involvement through making a 3 year commitment.

The reality is that we need broad participation at every spectrum of giving level in order for this project to work. Our goal is for every person (members and non-members) who worships at College Park to prayerfully consider what your family could do to financially support this important project. This is a moment in our history where we need every person who is blessed by the ministry of this body to be a part of its future.

There are three actions steps that we'd ask you to take during the next 40 Days beginning today:

1. **Pray.** I don't say this lightly or tritely. We will be providing some prayer opportunities that will be posted on the micro-site, including a special Fresh Encounter Prayer service on February 21. But even more we want to call you to pray privately, to pray with your family, pray in your small groups and big groups. Pray, pray, pray.
2. **Attend a Dessert Night.** We will have dozen or more nights where you can hear even more detail regarding the project with about 120 others and have an opportunity to ask questions about the details of the project. Again, we'd like every person here to attend one of those nights. In the foyer today we have some kiosks set up for you to register today, and I would invite you to do so immediately after the service.
3. **Turn in a commitment card.** At a Dessert Night that you'll receive a commitment card. I'd ask you to prayerfully consider giving to what I'll call the "gulp line" – a level that you know is possible but painful. Our goal is to have every card turned in by March 14.

This is a very important time in our church's history. The vision for this project will only be realized if we do this together, so please – be engaged. We need to do this together.

### **Why "First to the Lord?"**

You probably noticed that the sermon title and text doesn't necessarily fit with a study of the book of Matthew. We'll pick our study up on March 21 when we deal with the subject of the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit from Matthew 12:22-32. In the meantime, we are going to walk through an expositional study on 2 Corinthians 8-9. Yes, we are going to talk about giving. Now I know what some of you are thinking so let me give you a few reasons why we need to do this:

1. **I don't want you to miss the spiritual value of this process.** Considering a financial commitment creates a beautiful moment for spiritual growth, and I don't want

you to miss the teaching moments that God has for us. I believe that God wants more than a building out of this for us; he wants to stretch us and teach us things. Every time I've been involved in this kind of moment in a church's life, I've seen people really, really grow. It is stressful; it is personal; it is spiritual; and it is beautiful. And every time I learn something wonderful about God and money.

- 2. The Bible talks a lot about money.** Did you know that Jesus talked more about money than he talked about hell? In light of that, I think that we probably don't talk about money enough, and our Elders would tell you that we've not dealt with this biblical issue as often as we probably should over the years. I know that it often makes people a bit uncomfortable and even opens me up to the charge that the only reason that we are talking about this is because we are trying to raise money for a new building. While it is true that I want you to sacrificially give to this project, I have a much bigger agenda and it relates to the third reason.
- 3. Our hearts are connected to our money.** Jesus' statement is not only well-known bibilically; it is proven practically: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). So the issue in play here is not just dollars and cents. There really is an orientation of the heart that is tied to use of money.
- 4. We've probably given more out of our abundance than out of our need.** Here I want to be careful, but maybe have you consider something with me. You might look at the amazing display of generosity that has come from our church family throughout its history and think that we have been a generous church. I think that would be correct. However, I think that there is a danger in being content with that. We are asking you to consider giving at a new level – beyond abundance. You might call this "gulp giving" – the kind of giving that creates raised eyebrows or a dry swallow. I'm talking about a kind of giving that is sacrificial and creates faith and dependency upon God.

So my aim in the next four weeks is to help us think through how to think about this great moment that is in front of us. I will simply try to walk you through what the Bible says. It will create some tension and maybe even some new categories. I want to show you a vision of what Biblical generosity is all about, and then we are going to give you the most significant opportunity in our church's history to practice that. And my hope is that once you have tasted and seen the Lord's goodness in giving that you will come to see how true the Bible is when it says, "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

### **The Message of 2 Corinthians 8-9**

2 Corinthians 8-9 is one of the most important sections in the Bible on the subject of generosity, and to understand it you have to know something about three churches.

- **Jerusalem Church** – a primarily Jewish congregation who had been hit hard by a famine which created some significant needs. The church in Antioch (Acts 11:29-30) had already sent relief and try to helped.
- **Corinthian Church** – a church founded by Paul during his second missionary journey located in a city that was the gateway between Rome and the East that had a population of 500,000. The church reflected the composite of the city in that it was a mix of Gentile and Jews, slave and free, rich and poor.
- **Macedonian Churches** - a group of churches in cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea that Paul visited as a result of a vision from God in Acts 16. These churches were in a very difficult financial situation.

The apostle Paul is the author of 2 Corinthians, his second letter to the church at Corinth. Paul's ministry was primarily to the Gentiles, but part of his ministry involved "remembering the poor" (Galatians 2:9-10). However, this was more than just a benevolence need; there was a racial issue under the surface between Jews and Gentile. Jerusalem was primarily a Jewish congregation and the generosity of predominately Gentile churches served to bring a great unity in the body of Christ.

Paul saw the offering as a three-fold opportunity. First, it was a way to meet the needs of hurting people. Second, it was a chance to bring unity. Third, it was an opportunity to talk about the joy of generosity.

Three churches are in the mix here. One with a need (Jerusalem), one that responded generously in their poverty (Macedonians), and one that was preparing to give (Corinth).

So with that as the very important background, let's now look at some key observations that come out of this text about generosity. There are four:

### **1. Generosity is motivated through personal example**

1 Corinthians 6:1-4 indicates that when Paul visited the church at Corinth, they had inquired about participating in an offering for the Jerusalem Church. The purpose of 2 Corinthians 8-9 was to encourage the people of Corinth to take a generous offering for the needs of the Jerusalem Church. And he used it as a teaching moment to talk with them about the beauty of biblical giving. But what is remarkable is the central role that the example of the Macedonians played in Paul's argument.

Paul had already made the appeal to the Macedonian Churches, and they had responded with an amazing level of generosity. They, like the Corinthians, had heard about the offering, and they participated in a stunning way. Paul uses the Macedonian example as a motivator for the Corinthian church. He hoped that the story of generosity in one church would motivate another.

In fact, Paul used the story of the church at Corinth to motivate the Macedonians to give. 2 Corinthians 9:2 tells us that Paul even boasted to the Macedonians about the commitment that the church at Corinth had made. The motivation in the Macedonian churches was so strong that Paul feared that if the church of Corinth didn't fulfill their commitment, it would result in humiliation for everyone and discouragement. Therefore, Paul sent Titus and other men ahead of him to be sure that the offering happened.

There is something really powerful about your life's message when it comes to generosity. When you are able to see the Lord provide in your life or when you see the Lord provide in someone else's life, it is really motivating.

One of the great books on giving is, at its core, a life's message. Randy Alcorn wrote *The Treasure Principle* as an expression of what he learned when he had to give everything away. In 1990 he participated in a non-violent protest of an abortion clinic that resulted in him being arrested and sued by the abortion clinic. They eventually won a judgment of \$8.4 million against him and attempted to garnish his wages. The only way for him to prevent the abortion clinic from getting money from him was to give everything away. Alcorn's book is powerful because it is written from the vantage point of a man who discovered the joy of giving.

Do you have a life's message when it comes to giving? Have you seen God provide? The problem with stingy living is that it steals joy from your heart and it robs you of a story that could create great hope in someone else.

So as you enter into the rugged journey of thinking about your generosity, if God shows up in a powerful way in your life, be sure that you tell someone. We need the encouragement of God's work in the lives of others.

## **2. Generosity is rooted in the grace of God**

The second thing to note here is the connectedness of generosity to the grace of God. Generosity begins with grace and it continues by grace. A good definition of grace is God's unmerited favor. You could think of it as God's kind treatment of people who don't deserve it. There is no better example of grace than the forgiveness of our sins through the sacrificial gift of Christ. It was completely undeserved; a complete one-way blessing.

Generosity is rooted in the grace of God because those who really understand how much God has given them are motivated to give to others. 2 Corinthians 8:9 summarizes this well – "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."

There is more here. Grace is not only a description of a past event; it is also the undeserved and supernatural power of God displayed in your life. It is a work of God in you that others know cannot be done in your own power. Verse one tells us that the generosity of the Macedonians was a clear evidence of God's grace. They were already in a tough spot, but they still chose to give. Their giving, in spite of their need, was obviously something that God did in them. In other words, they could not have given like they had if the grace of God wasn't at work. On their own they would have been selfish, scared, and self-sufficient. Instead they were generous and full of faith which was fruit of God's grace in their lives.

Giving in the New Testament is all about God's grace. It is motivated by grace – because of what Jesus has done for us. It is empowered by grace – we're given the ability to trust in God for our needs. And it results in grace – people are blessed and we are blessed. Therefore, grace giving is the tone of New Testament, not tithing. I'm often asked about tithing, and here's what I usually say. Tithing was the bare minimum requirement of a people who understood a sliver of what we know about God's grace. Our giving should reflect the beauty of God's grace to us.

### **3. Generosity is linked to the Lordship of Christ**

My favorite passage in this entire section is verse five. I love it because it links giving to the Lordship of Christ in such a beautiful way. The Macedonians gave themselves first to the Lord and then to Paul and the offering. In other words, they were not just tipping God with their money. They saw giving as an expression of an overall commitment to Jesus' ownership of their lives.

This is a very foundational orientation that makes a world of difference. Listen to the following passages that Alcorn cites in his book:

- "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps 24:1)
- "The silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the Lord Almighty" (Haggai 2:8)
- "Remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deut 8:18)
- "You are not your own; you were bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19-20)

Everything I am and everything I have belongs to the Lord. He created it; he made it possible for me to have it; it belongs to him. This is a radical shift in thinking that many people need to make.

One of the clearest illustrations of your submission to the Lordship of Christ is what you do with your money. In fact I would argue that you don't really value the Lordship of Christ in your life if you don't give. I may agree with the concept, I may love the idea of the rule of Jesus, but if I don't give, I really don't believe in it.

#### **4. Generosity is part of spiritual maturity**

The final observation comes from verse seven - "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. Paul believed that generosity was simply another expression of what it means to be spiritually mature.

The church was known for their giftedness, but they would not really be mature unless giving was a part of the equation. Paul viewed it as an important part of their spiritual development. A lack of generosity has, at its root, a spiritual immaturity problem. Again, we hear the words of Jesus: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21). We also hear Paul's words in Colossians 3:5 where he links greed with idolatry.

There are some of you who need to come to terms with the fact that how you handle your money tells you more than what you even know about the condition of your heart. I'm not just talking about giving to a building program; I mean giving of any kind. My prayer is that there will be some of you who will repent of idolatry this morning – that you'll see how a lack of generosity really is a window to your soul.

But I would also hope that those you who have discovered the joy of giving will speak up and encourage others about the real joy of biblical generosity.

My goal in all of this is not to guilt you into giving to our Mission Expansion Project. I really want you to understand the beauty of generosity and all the spiritual lessons that come with it. I don't want you to miss what God has for you.

I've been through multiple stewardship campaigns in my time as a pastor. Each one has created some valuable lessons, but they are not comfortable lessons. I have always seen God provide in ways that were so meaningful and special, but as Sarah and I began thinking and praying about our commitment, it created a significant level of tension for me. My wife tends to have more faith in God when we are making a 3-year commitment than what I do. We are a good balance, but I tend to look at the numbers very carefully and she often reminds me that God has always taken care of us. As we approach our leadership commitment to the Mission Expansion Project, I wanted to be sure that we hit the "gulp line." I shared with her what I felt we should give, and we both agreed that we had a good number. The gulp for us was not just about the number; it was about funding the number. We determined that we would dip into some dedicated funds for vehicle savings and college savings. So our giving created some significant tension and future risk. But we believed it was what God wanted us to do, and we made our commitment.

A few days later our water heater broke. I couldn't believe it. I thought "Lord, what are you doing? We just made this commitment, and now this happens!" Needless to say, I was not full of faith. I called a plumber to fix our water heater, and after he looked at it he said, "You know your water heater isn't broken; it went down because this pipe came loose. I can fix it for about \$200 and be on my way." Well that was a lot better than the \$1800 cost I was expecting. I watched him fix it, and we started talking about his work, family, and church. We ended up talking a lot of about his spiritual journey, and it was quite a wonderful conversation.

He fixed the pipe and started for the door. I retrieved my checkbook and asked him how much I owed him. He said, "You know what? I just feel led that I want to bless you tonight. There's no charge."

Tears came to my eyes because I knew that this was about more than a water heater. God was telling me, "Mark, I've got your back. You can trust me. I'm going to take care of you."

And since that time the Lord has shown me over and over that he is worthy of my trust.

You see, I long for you to see the Lord like that in your life. I long for you to see the beauty of what it means to dedicate yourself and your money first to the Lord.

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