

Our Antioch Moment

Live Generously

2 Corinthians 9

Mark Vroegop

“Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction. The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift” (2 Cor. 9:1-15)!

Last week, I introduced you to the model of ministry that we find with the church at Antioch in the book of Acts. The focus of the disciples’ mission shifts from Jerusalem, and predominantly Jews, to the city of Antioch—from which churches are planted all over the Roman Empire. I attempted to show you how the church’s unique opportunity led to growth and a community of people that confounded the world.

I suggested to you that we need to consider our church’s “Antioch Moment”—the strategic opportunity to multiply the gospel through our lives, in our neighborhoods, in our city, and around the world. I laid before you four key strategic markers that emerged from a months-long discussion with our staff and elders:

- Reach our World
- Deepen our Discipleship
- Develop our Leaders

- Maximize our Resources

At our Congregational Meeting and Worship-Based Prayer Night later today, I'll share more detail with you in each of those areas, along with some questions we are asking ourselves about how to use the property at 96th and Shelborne. It is important for you to know where our elders believe we are headed because our church members will vote on our annual budget tonight.

Our strategic plan has a lot included in it, and I did my best to make it clear and simple. At our all-staff meeting, I asked for constructive criticism on last week's sermon. Let me give you three feedback points that they gave me:

1. Strangely to me, some of our staff told me that when people heard about Saul and Barnabas leaving Antioch, they wondered if I was leaving. The answer is no. We feel even more called to this church than ever.
2. Some people were overwhelmed with the concept of "both"—almost feeling guilty because of everything we offer. That is one of the risks with doing so many things, but it is also what has made College Park unique over the years. "Both" is beautiful, but it can be overwhelming. And I would simply tell you that you need to pray about how to belong, grow, and multiply in some way. Your season of life and your capacity factor into the equation. On the one hand, I want to caution you because the northern suburbs offer too many non-church opportunities that can take over your life. On the other hand, I would not want you to confuse our passion for ministry with a guilt-inducing appeal.
3. Others were not sure what I meant by maximizing our resources. While I talked about that a little in terms of our website and publishing, and I'll talk more about our thoughts on our facilities tonight, I wanted to expand more fully on generosity in this message.

Multiplied Generosity

We left Acts 11 with this statement in verse 29-30— "So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." Part of the unique grace of Antioch was not only that they multiplied the gospel by sending Saul and Barnabas to plant churches, but they also multiplied the grace of God through their generosity.

This is always a part of multiplication. Generosity is a natural extension and an amplifier of God's grace. Show me a church on mission, and you'll find a generous people. They give of their time, their talent, and their treasure.

Take for instance the building that we worship in every Sunday. Since its opening in 2011, we've had over 1,500 services inside this space. And this room wouldn't be here without the generosity of the people of this church from 2009-2012. In the midst of the Great Recession, our elders drew a line in the sand of \$12.5 million in commitments that we needed. And our church pledged almost \$15 million! When we constructed this building, people were fearful that our Christmas Offering would go down.

And yet, our Christmas Offering has dramatically increased. For six years in a row, it has exceeded a million dollars. This past year, we gave \$1.5 million to bring the gospel to Syrian refugees.

Just think of the multiplication of the gospel that happened because of the generosity of our people. Those of you who came after 2012 benefit every Sunday from the generosity of those of us who helped to pay for this building. I don't say that to guilt you. I say that to help you see the reality of what happens.

Our vision is to consider how we can multiply like the church at Antioch did. After we retired the debt on this building, we rolled our annual mortgage into planting new churches. That's how we've been able to plant four churches since 2015. And we are hoping to plant more in the future because there is a need for more healthy churches in Indianapolis; and there's a need for College Park, as a mega-church, to stay on a deployment mission.

How to Live Generously

Our text this Sunday is not in the book of Acts, but it is related to the situation that we read about in Acts 11:29. Paul leveraged the churches that he planted for the purpose of generosity toward the saints that were in Jerusalem. Second Corinthians 9 is a part of a letter he sent to a strategic, wealthy, talented, and problematic church. As a body, their giftedness was ahead of their godliness. And Paul needed to help them understand the priority of generosity.

In fact, this chapter almost reads as if Paul is worried that they are going to find some convenient and justified way to shirk their commitment—something I know we've all done at one time or another. Everyone knows that they should be generous, but we find all kinds of reasons not to be. A few examples:

- “When I have more money, I'll start giving”
- “It's easier for wealthy people to give, so I'll pray they do it”
- “It's just too tight right now to give”
- “I keep forgetting to bring my checkbook”

But here's the deal: If you miss the opportunity to be generous, you miss the chance to be a part of the multiplication moment. So, I'm preaching this message today, not because of what I want from you, but because of what I want for you.¹

So, let's learn from Paul's instruction to the church in Corinth. We'll see the mindset, action, and the grace as it relates to generosity.

1. The Mindset of Generosity

Second Corinthians 9 begins with Paul affirming the church for its desire to be a part of this important generosity moment. Verse one identifies that it isn't necessary for Paul to reiterate the opportunity to them. They might not need to be reminded, but we need to understand it.

¹ I believe this statement needs to be credited to Andy Stanley

A famine struck Israel and the surrounding areas, leaving the people in the church in a desperate condition. It seems that the church in Jerusalem was leading the way in taking care of Christians in need. As Paul returned to the churches he'd planted throughout the Roman Empire, he knew there was a strategic opportunity for these new, multi-ethnic churches to express their love for the saints in Jerusalem. There were historic and ethnic reasons that this would send an important message. Therefore, Paul began challenging churches to give. That's what he means by "the ministry of the saints."

In doing this, Paul gives us some important and foundational concepts as it relates to generosity. He helps us to see how we should think about our attitude regarding money.

In verse two, Paul affirms their "readiness," and he used that attitude in order to motivate other churches. Apparently, Paul bragged (in a good way) about the generosity of the church in Corinth such that other churches were inclined to follow their example. In other words, their attitude was contagious.

In order for biblical generosity to thrive, there must be the right attitude or frame of mind. We'll see more of this later in the text, but it is clear that the Corinthians had a willing spirit to be involved. This attitude springs from a right understanding of God's grace. Two examples:

"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. 8:9).

"What do you have that you did not receive" (1 Cor. 4:7)?

Biblical generosity starts with an attitude that reflects the graciousness of God to us through Christ. When we fail to approach generosity that way, it becomes easy to curl our fingers around our resources. What results is a life in which we are stingy, hoard resources, seek comfort in financial security, live with a cut-throat and survival-of-the-fittest mindset, and are prideful in thinking we are "self-made." We can start to see our money through a self-centered lens, and then it is so easy to find ways to justify our lack of generosity.

We start to talk about what we don't have vs. what we do have. We talk about enablement vs. empathy. We talk about what is required vs. the opportunity. Instead of seeing generosity through the lens of grace, we see our money through the lens of greed.

The starting point with generosity is your attitude, not just with money, but also with giving. Without the right attitude, generosity will never flourish.

2. The Action of Generosity

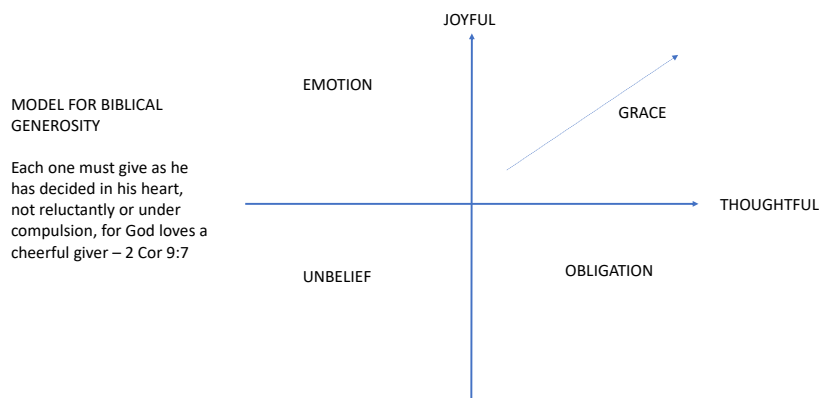
I find the next few verses to be fascinating. Even though Paul knows about the Corinthians' attitude, he decides to send "the brothers" to the church to be sure that they are going to be faithful in their giving. Verse three states this clearly. We find the same thing in verse five. Paul sends Titus and some other brothers to be sure that the Corinthians would have the offering ready by the time that Paul arrived.

Paul worried that the Corinthians might fall into the behavior that I'm sure is somewhat familiar. It happens when you make a commitment or feel compelled, but then don't follow up on it. You feel the pull of some opportunity, but it isn't long until the pull of other things causes you to not follow through. Some people make a lifestyle of this. They talk about needing to get their financial house in order, but the chaos gives them an excuse. Others are completely genuine, but they lack the regularity of generosity.

In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul instructs the churches to give on a regular basis to avoid the challenge of Paul showing up to find they have neglected their giving, causing an uncomfortable moment when they feel obligated to give because of the size of the gift. The discipline of giving is a vital part of biblical generosity—so much so that it causes one to give willingly and not out of obligation (2 Cor. 9:5).

When this kind of action and attitude are combined, it produces the kind of giving that God commends (v. 7). The wrong attitude produces a reluctant giver. The lack of action results in a compulsive giver. Biblical generosity involves a balance of both.

You could think of it like this 2x2 chart:



Our giving can be motivated by one of the four quadrants. We can give because of emotion as we are moved by an opportunity. We can give only out of a sense of obligation—because we have to. Or we can approach giving from a position of unbelief—giving in to particular belief patterns that cause us to live in fear, covetousness, or even idolatry. The biblical model is to give increasingly in a joyful and thoughtful manner. Second Corinthians 9:7 tells us not to give reluctantly or under compulsion. We are to give joyfully and thoughtfully.

I'd like to apply this concept by asking you to locate where you are on this chart today. Are you characterized more by joyful/emotional giving or by thoughtful/obligation giving? Or maybe you are in the grace category, with a good balance of both joy and thoughtfulness. Just identify where you are on the chart. And then I'd like for you to identify where you'd like to be over the next few months.

Consider what action steps you should take such that would help you to be more thoughtful or more joyful in your giving. A few ideas:

- Decide that you are going to give on a weekly or biweekly basis
- Develop a budget that includes a regular allotment for giving, and give that away first
- Pray over the giving statements or emails that you receive
- As you walk into the church building, thank God that you help provide for this church's mission
- Look at your charitable contributions when you do your taxes and compare it to your annual income, and ask yourself if you are okay with that
- Set aside some money, and look for ways to give it away

Now some of you are immediately wondering if I'm only talking about giving to the church. The answer is "no, I'm not." You should be generous with your time, talents, and treasure in every way. But I also want to be unapologetic that I believe it's right for you to make giving to your church a priority. Why?

1. Because the local church is "Plan A" when it comes to God's plan to reach the world
2. Because your church is the main place you receive spiritual nourishment
3. Because the church is a strategic pooling of resources with like-minded people

So yes, I think the local church should be a priority in your joyful and thoughtful giving. I believe that regular and prioritized giving to your local church is not only biblical, but I also think it is good for your soul.

3. The Grace in Generosity

The final aspect of generosity relates to the grace of God that flows in us and through us when we embrace God's plan for our resources. This is one of the reasons why talking about generosity is important. If you neglect to be generous, you miss the opportunity to experience God's grace in this area.

In verses 8-10 we learn about the promise of God's grace when we give. I love verse eight because I've seen it to be true in my own life. Giving creates a gap, and verse eight promises that God is able to "make all grace abound to you." Sometimes his provision comes in an unexpected way. Sometimes it looks like vehicles that last longer. Sometimes it looks like joyful contentment that wasn't there before. Regardless, embracing a generosity mindset creates an opportunity for you to live on God's grace. Giving is a tangible reminder that you trust in God, not yourself or your plans. And that's why it's such an important spiritual activity.

But beyond that, generosity also is a means of God's grace to others. In verse eleven, Paul identifies that giving produces thanksgiving to God. As the Jerusalem saints would receive the gift from the Corinthians and other churches, they would thank God for the gift. These churches would see the grace of God through the generosity of others. Just think of that! Giving allows us to take our United States currency and convert it into thanksgiving to God.

In this way, the giver experiences the grace of God. And the receiver praises God for his grace. In this way, generosity amplifies the grace of God such that people are reminded of God's inexpressible gift through the cross.

I get to see that grace all the time, witnessing what God is doing through the generosity of our church. Let me give you a few examples:

On Wednesday night, we had 130 high school students listening to Brad Merchant talk about how to navigate same-sex attraction and identity from a biblical standpoint. So, if you give to our church, you had a part in making that happen.

The One Fellowship Incubator is off to a great start. The church has about 130 people worshipping together. We'll invest over \$400,000 in the start of that new church. And if you give, you have a part in seeing the gospel spread in Pike Township with our seventh church plant.

Nehemiah Bible Church, under the leadership of Cory Johnson, was planted out of College Park in 2013. The congregation has over 180 worshipers every week. It originally met in an old church building that we renovated. Then another church gave them a facility. And we are still helping the ministry of Nehemiah Bible Church by donating \$25,000 a year. If you give, you have a part in that.

Mother's University and Heart Change are spiritual and life-skills discipleship programs in Brookside. They've ministered to hundreds of women over the last ten years. Here's what Cindy Palmer, the founder said,

The investment that College Park has made these ten years has brought gospel truth, gospel grace, and gospel love to hundreds of women and their children. Women who believed that college "wasn't available to them" are in college or have graduated. Women who never held a job long enough to have a performance review are staying in their jobs for years. Families who were constantly moving couches or who were evicted every few months have now been in their homes for multiple years, and their children have been in the same school for multiple years. Children who only knew chaos, anger, and neglect are now being raised by moms who have a vision for themselves and their children.

If you give to your church, you have a part in that story.

Finally, David Palmer wanted to create a discipleship and employment model. In 2014, he started Purposeful Design, a furniture making company whose motto is "Rebuilding lives. Building furniture." In its first year, Purposeful Design reached \$37,000 in sales and trained six men. In 2018, it had \$1.4 million in sales and impacted forty-nine men, women, and youth through employment and training.

A businessman in the Salesforce tower, looking over the newly delivered Purposeful Design furniture and knowing where it had come from said, "Isn't it amazing that this beautiful furniture was made by men who used to be homeless in front of the building!" One of the craftsmen, Jesse, heard that and said, "Yes, I was homeless in front of that very building."

These are just a few of the stories that I hear all the time. And when you give to your church, you help multiply the grace of God. We are able to work together to both experience God's grace and multiply God's grace.

Our vision for next year involves:

- Reaching our World
- Deepening our Discipleship
- Developing our Leaders
- Maximizing our Resources

We need a mindset of multiplication like the church at Antioch. But we also need a heart for generosity as we receive and multiply God's grace through our lives and through our church.

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