

November 3, 2019

Finding Trouble: Being Exceedingly Generous

Luke 21:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

I want to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Many of you have mixed emotions and reactions connected to sermons on giving. You have felt pressure and guilt before – even felt manipulated. Some of you have had a genuine desire to be exceedingly generous listening to one of these messages, while at the same time being fearful God can't be trusted when it comes to your financial resources. Maybe you're anticipating that same reaction is on the way.

There are probably a few more elephants in the room; let's get them out in the open as well. You're uncomfortable with the fact that these sermons/messages about being exceedingly generous are given by someone who is financially supported by the very people he or she is talking to, a few weeks before you will be asked to make an Estimate of Giving for next year. I can't say I get it; so turn to your neighbor and say, "He doesn't get it, but I do."

And here's another elephant: we have accumulated more things than we could possibly need; so much so that we don't even remember what's in our drawers and closets and garages and storage units. And that troubles us; makes us feel guilty. In the same book by Wess Stafford I quoted from last week, I came across a staggering fact (from 15 years ago): Americans spend more on garbage bags every year than 90 of the world's poorest nations spend on everything annually! I'd hope we are spending less on plastic bags today, but how much do you think Amazon spends on cardboard each year?

We have an accumulation problem that correlates with a generosity problem. Let's just name it. We're in trouble; but not a good kind of trouble. I want to invite us to find this other kind of trouble – the kind where we find ourselves in over our heads; in a position where only the Mastery of Jesus can save us. Let's think for a moment about being exceedingly generous.

I want to make it clear that we are aiming at a Gospel-Focused Generosity in which our giving is only a response to God's grace in Jesus, stimulated and sustained by the life of God's Holy Spirit in us. The Christian life is not a works-based faith. The kind of excessive generosity I we're called to is for those who are first convinced that nothing we do can save us, that Jesus has paid the ultimate price for our forgiveness, that giving is one way for us to show our gratitude, that giving to the work of God's Kingdom is a 'get to' – not a 'have to.'

There's a lot in the Bible about giving. We've looked at a number of those passages over the years – in worship and study together. Today I want to see what these two passages have to say about giving, generosity, and the good kind of trouble. They might help us see generosity from a slightly different angle, but they certainly aren't exhaustive of what scripture says about giving.

First of all (from 2 Corinthians 8), giving is primarily between you and God. In speaking about the generosity of the Macedonians, Paul notes, "They gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us." (2 Cor. 8:5b) Our giving should be rooted in a vital and personal relationship with Christ. God, through His scriptures, invites us to give to and for the Lord, so that it is out of our relationship to Him and our attentiveness to His leading that we are willing to give generously to 'whoever and whatever God calls us to give.' We shouldn't give because someone else pressures us to give, or so that others will think well of us. The Macedonians were excited and eager to give; they actually begged to get in on the giving opportunity.

This circles back to what I said about Gospel-Centered Generosity. Giving is merely a response to the self-giving life of Jesus. Paul wants the Corinthians to give in light of what Christ has done. "For you know the generous act [grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) We give because He first gave to us. In fact, all that we have ultimately belongs to Him and needs to be held loosely. But that's a struggle for us, isn't it? Why? Because most of what's in our bank accounts came from paychecks we earned/are earning. Maybe that's an elephant for another time . . .

Here are a couple more important lessons for us from Luke 21:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.

- 1) The generosity God calls us to is in **proportion** to what He has provided. There's a lot of other stuff going on around this story in Luke 21. One thing we do know: Jesus wasn't going for the accuracy of an accountant when He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them." (Luke 21:3) He's clearly not talking about the actual amount she gave, but what she gave in proportion to what she had. Paul says, "The gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have." (2 Corinthians 8:12) [Review] Giving is between you and God. Generosity is only a response to the gift Christ gave to us. And giving is measured in proportion to what God has given us – which means there is no need to compare.

2) There is a **way to inspire** exceeding generosity by highlighting the ridiculous generosity of others. Generosity can be contagious. Whatever else is going on in Luke 21, Jesus' attention toward the widow who was exceedingly generous has inspired countless others to give. Paul does something similar in 2 Corinthians. If you read all of chapters 8 and 9, it's pretty clear this is a public campaign. Is Paul actually inviting a little friendly competition? [Several years ago, in raising canned goods and money for our local food bank, the students challenged the adults to see who could raise more. We brought in way more canned goods and cash than ever before. The challenge did us all good.] Paul is actually challenging the Corinthians by letting them know that the Macedonians – who are suffering and struggling – gave more than anyone could have asked or imagined. They are the 'poor widows' who are giving over and above; out of proportion by choice. Principles of the value of anonymity when giving (found in Matthew 6:3-4) have to be factored in; but a little challenge might be good for all of us. The matching gift for IJM on Freedom Sunday has led to a lot of generosity and collaboration with other churches that we would not have pursued without the challenge. People can inspire people to be more generous.

3) This is a **hard ASK**. It's okay to ask directly and with boldness – especially when we know our generosity supports the things on God's heart. When Paul says this is his 'advice' in verse 8 and 'not from the Lord,' he means it's not directly from the Lord. He's not quoting Jesus. Some take his qualifier at the beginning of v.8 to mean he's not pressuring them at all. But it's not like he's just 'suggesting they might consider the possibility of maybe giving a little extra if and when it works out, after all the bills are paid and they have enough in savings.' This is probably the hardest financial ask he makes. It's true he isn't quoting Jesus, but he IS using his apostolic authority when he says, "Now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means." (2 Corinthians 8:11) In other words, put your money where your mouth is! Bold asks are biblical.

4) Finally, this giving invitation in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is a **specific offering for the poor** in Jerusalem. Paul is not raising his salary. This offering would be one of the ways that the poor widow who gave everything in Luke 21 would continue to survive. a) Giving to the poor is complicated and many of the ways we have tried to do it in the past have not been helpful. [see *When Helping Hurts* by Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic] b) We aren't called to give to the poor so that they can someday have a more comfortable and affluent life like ours. [see *Becoming Whole* by Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic] c) We are called to give to the poor as a reflection of the fact that "Christ, became poor, so that by His poverty [we] might become rich." d) We have to come to grips that we are (all of us) wealthy compared to a majority of the people on this planet who are incredibly poor. We are the rich putting our gifts in the treasury (Luke 21) and we are the Corinthians. e) And both of us have needs. Wess Stafford points out that the wealthy and the poor have needs when it comes to their abundance and lack. The wealthy need "Caution" and the poor need "Comfort." And both need each other.

In his work over the years, Wess would take people with financial means to see Compassion's work in under-resourced cities and villages. But he wasn't just trying to get them to give money. He wanted others to see what he knew as normal from growing up in West Africa. He wanted his guests to be transformed into grateful and exceedingly generous people by the very ones who, in their poverty, had gifts to give as well. What gifts do the poor have to offer to the rich? The gifts of: joy in spite of their few resources; a disproportional generosity that makes no fiscal sense; the value of community over personal prosperity; and what it looks like to cling tenaciously to the hope that God will provide, instead of going through life always thinking about how I can pull it off. Stafford said, "I have seen this kind of powerful impact time and again over the years. When the wealthy and the poor get together, each ends up meeting the desperate needs of the other. Too often Satan achieves his wicked agenda by keeping them apart – geographically and philosophically. The result is that one tends to die in need, the other in greed. But when Jesus brings us together, the genuine needs of both are mysteriously and wonderfully satisfied. In God's amazing economy, the rich and poor need each other." (Tim Stafford in *Too Small To Ignore*, p.107) The widow needed the rich to give and the rich (all of us) need to spend time with that poor widow and others like her.

And all of us need Jesus if we are ever going to be exceedingly generous.

And so we come to this table again and again; a table that is for everyone; rich and poor. Celebrating communion directs us to "the generous act [grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . though He was rich, yet for your[our] sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty you[we] might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)