

Extravagant Generosity

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2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

*Money is a
trigger word
in churches.*

Some words immediately trigger a response in people. They're called trigger words for the simple reason that some words elicit an emotional response in people. Take the word homosexuality. The mere mention of this word in church triggers an emotional response. I know this to be true because I preached on the subject a while back. People's comments after the sermon caught me by surprise. Really, I thought to myself, did I say *that*? So I went back and listened to my sermon. Sure enough, I never said some of the things attributed to me. I suspect some people reacted like they did because homosexuality triggers a visceral response in people.

Evangelism is another trigger word for some people in the church. Evangelism immediately conjures up negative images of people who, in their zeal to win converts, become pushy and aggressive.

Money is another trigger word in churches. As soon as some people hear the word money in church, they assume the church wants their money, that the church is always asking for their money, and churches

continue to badger people until they get what they want.

I want to talk about money in relationship to the broader theme of generosity. We're not likely to make any headway if we default into thinking that the church is always asking for money. I regard giving as simply one indicator of generosity.

In our Scripture lesson, Paul urges Christians in Corinth to participate in a collection for famine relief for poor Christians in Jerusalem. He urges these Corinthians to model themselves after churches in Macedonia. This offering will not only eliminate physical suffering but go a long way in healing the racial divide between Gentile Christians living in Corinth and Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem.

Paul contends that grace is key to generosity. Grace is referenced ten times in chapters 8-9. He begins in chapter 8, "I want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the *grace* of God that has been granted to the churches in Macedonia." He appeals to Titus, in verse 6, to help bring to completion this offering of grace. He writes in verse 7, "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech,

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in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this grace of giving.”

This grace for Paul is supremely manifested through Jesus Christ. Verse 9 is called, in ancient literature, a chiasmic structure. It’s called a chiasmic because the first letter in the Greek word, Chi, is shaped like an “X.” The point of the sentence is expressed in a crisscrossed A-B-B-A format.

Though he was rich,(A)

He became poor (B)

So that by his poverty (B)

You might become rich. (A)

The sentence, in crisscrossed fashion, teaches us about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the cross, Jesus loses everything he has to give everything for us.

Grace literally translates as “unmerited favor.” God’s favor is unmerited. It’s not contingent on meritorious behavior. In truth, we cannot earn God’s grace or merit it. God’s grace is unearned and unmerited. Grace is God’s sheer gift to us.

In verse 1, this “grace of God *has been granted* to the churches in Macedonia.” The verb “has been granted” appears in passive voice meaning these Macedonians are recipients of grace before they are givers of grace.

Before we are givers, we are receivers. Before we can extend grace to others, we are recipients of God’s grace. We are receivers of grace before we become givers of grace.

We have a tendency to think of our money and possessions as things that belong to us. Paul asks a rhetorical question in his first Corinthian letter, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). His implied answer is that everything we own is on loan from God. We do not contribute a single oxygen atom to the air we breathe. We contribute nothing to the fact that we are born into 21st century America rather than the mountains of 9th century Nepal. Everything we own is on loan from God. Everything!

The giving of the churches in Macedonia is singled out for three principle reasons. First, their giving is voluntary. We read in verse 3 that “they voluntarily gave according to their means and even beyond their means.” There’s no hint of coercion or manipulation in their giving. I suspect people recoil whenever the church talks about money because they feel badgered and cajoled into giving. There is none of that here. The only pleading is from the Macedonians themselves, “who begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints” (8:4). Just once before I die, I dream of people begging for the privilege of giving to a church offering.

Tell me if this church ever applies undue pressure on you to give. The only pressure ought to come from a vertical rather than horizontal direction.

My dream for this church is that we would become famous for our generosity.

Second, their giving is prioritized. We learn in verse 5, “They gave themselves first to the Lord.” The order is important here. They give themselves first to God and then to God’s work in the world. This is the second time the word “give” appears in this passage. In the first instance, verse 1, God is the giver and we are the receivers. Now, in verse 5, we are transformed into givers and other people become the receivers.

Third, their giving is extravagant. Paul, in verse 2, strings together several superlatives in close proximity to make his point. He writes that “their abundant joy and extreme poverty overflow into a wealth of prosperity.” We’re told in verse 3, “They gave according to their means and even beyond their means.”

My dream for this church is that we would become famous for our generosity. Wouldn’t that be awesome? What if Vienna Presbyterian Church became famous for extravagant generosity?

People in the first century Greco-Roman world were known for being tight with their money and loose with their bodies. But early Christians distinguished themselves for being tight with their bodies and loose with their money. One of the earliest documents outside the New Testament is a second century letter by Mathetes, which is unlikely a proper name but a word

meaning disciple. Presumably, this anonymous Christian disciple writes an apology or defense of the faith to an anonymous unbeliever named Diognetus. Mathetes writes, “These Christians display a striking manner of life....They beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They share a common table, but not a common bed....They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the proscribed laws and at the same time surpass these laws by their lives.”

I’m struck by the line, “...they share a common table but not a common bed.” Christians had the reputation for being stingy with their bodies and promiscuous with their money. Tim Keller writes of our day, “In a materialistic culture like ours people keep their money and spread their bodies around. Christians who stand out in our culture are people who keep their bodies and are generous with their money.”

I want you to watch a short video on the subject of generosity. You can access this video on-line if you go to givetogenerosity.com.

The statistic in the video that jumps out at me is that Christians give less than 2.8 percent of their income to the church. This is hardly a definition of extravagant generosity.

So often we treat giving like Hollywood treats romances. Romance in cinema must some-

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how always be spontaneous, exuberant and impulsive. Some Christians are smitten with what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7: “God loves a cheerful giver.” Some Christians take this verse to mean that the only time we give is when we feel joyful. You know, when the urge strikes, then we give.

Don’t wait until you feel generous. Give and then see if you don’t develop a generous spirit in your giving.

I’m asking you on behalf of this church’s leadership to make a pledge to support God’s work through this church next year. Some of you are already ready to make such a pledge. There are pledge cards in the pew racks or you can complete this form on-line. For others, this appeal catches you cold. You are simply unprepared to indicate what you would like to give to the Lord’s work next year. Take the next week or November if you’d need it to pray, “Lord, what level of giving is appropriate to express my gratitude?”

When I talk about our becoming generous givers, some of you zone out. You are up to your neck in credit card debt and are struggling to pay bills on time. I’ve noticed a recent trend with regard to engaged couples. It’s not uncommon for couples to come into the marriage with significant credit card debt. It’s a bad habit started in college that continues into adulthood. When you add an interest rate of

14.5 percent or more to this debt, suddenly couples are trapped in a perpetual cycle of deficit spending. Some of us need to start further upstream by learning what it means to become diligent earners, wise savers, cautious debtors and prudent consumers. That’s the content of a class we offer in this church entitled “Good Sense.” For some reason, people are reluctant to take this class. We live in a day and age in which people are more willing to talk about their sex lives than money management. I’d like to match those who are proficient with handling money with those who are less skilled or just getting started with money. If you would like to register your interest in this class, go to viennapres.org/goodsense.

Let me return to something I said earlier. I dream of Vienna Presbyterian becoming a church famous for its generosity. This generosity is exhibited in every imaginable way, in the way we give our money and how we share our time.