

Generosity with Integrity

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2 Corinthians 8:16-
24

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

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I officiated at a wedding last weekend. The service was about to begin so I changed into my customary black robe. A little boy, perhaps five years of age, took one look at me and ran straight for his mother. “Mommy, come see the big man in the big dress.” I felt rather conspicuous in that moment. I mean, how do you explain to a five-year-old the tradition of wearing robes? I dared not tell him the design of my robe is sometimes called “a Geneva gown.”

Clergy wear robes for two reasons. First, a robe is less distracting. A robe prevents you from being preoccupied with whether a tie matches my suit or is there a stain on my lapel. Second, robes signify our pastoral office. Whenever I wear this robe, it reminds me of my calling to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. My primary job, in the language of 2nd Timothy, is to “...rightly divide the Word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). I am called to be faithful and accurate in preaching God’s Word. I’m not at liberty to ride my hobbies or select only those passages that I like. My calling, to borrow Paul’s words, is to preach “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

I sometimes preach on well-known, beloved passages of Scripture. Psalm 23 comes immediately to mind. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want....”

Other Bible passages are more obscure. Take the passage I read a few moments ago. Can anyone recall a single thought or word from this reading? I suspect if some of us had been connected to a monitor during the reading of this passage, our brains would have registered no EEG activity whatsoever. This passage won’t appear on anyone’s list of favorite Bible verses. I’ve never had it requested to be read at a wedding, funeral or any other special event in the life of this church.

We selected 2 Corinthians 8-9 as follow-on to *The Me I Want to Be* sermon series earlier this fall. It was chosen to help us transition from the “me” God wants me to be to the “we” God wants us to be.

I looked forward to preaching on the first half of 2 Corinthians 8 last Sunday. I was already cognizant of several memorable verses in this portion of Corinthians. But when I reread the second half of chapter 8 this past Monday, my heart sank. Is there anything in

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this passage that translates well into a sermon? Initially, I couldn't come up with anything. Surely Paul doesn't intend this section of his letter to serve as filler. If "Every Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching" (2 Timothy 3:16), then there are lessons God wants us to learn from this passage. Sometimes we have to sit with a passage awhile before God's Word comes alive to us.

Chapters 8-9 address what Paul calls, in his letters, "the collection." Paul is taking a collection to aid poor Christians living in Jerusalem. This offering serves a dual purpose. It not only alleviates human need but goes a long way in mitigating racial strife, since it is given by Gentile Christians to support Jewish Christians in their hour of need.

These two chapters amount to a stewardship letter. What's a stewardship letter? you ask. You know, those letters sent with your giving statements that almost nobody reads? That's a stewardship letter.

This stewardship letter deals with more than money. It focuses on the broader theme of generosity. Last Sunday, I spoke about a dream I have for our church. I dream that we would become famous for generosity. Let me clarify what I mean by famous. I don't mean famous in a way that draws attention to ourselves, as though we want people to notice what we are doing.

Rather, we want people to notice God. We are generous because God has lavished His generosity on us.

There is one word that appears ten times in a span of these two chapters. It's the Greek word *Xaris*. The first Greek letter "X" is pronounced "Chi," so the word is pronounced "charis." We derive our English term charity from this word. The order is important here. We are grace receivers before we are grace givers. We receive grace from God in order to share God's grace with the world.

Paul's opponents are suspicious that he is somehow profiting from his missionary travels. Paul's detractors accuse him of being in it for the money. It's a criticism that dogs evangelists to this day.

The Rev. Leroy Jenkins is a self-proclaimed evangelist and faith healer who lived down the street from the college Chris and I attended. Rev. Leroy was also pastor of the Church of What's Happening Now. I'm not making this up! He lived in an enormous house surrounded by a heavily fortified steel fence. People often speculated that he fleeced the flock to support his lavish lifestyle. Sure enough, several years ago he married one of his followers, who happened to be a \$20 million dollar lottery winner. He married her in Las Vegas nine days after her husband died until her family intervened to have the marriage annulled.

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Financial impropriety in the church is a killer sin. It's the devil's playground.

Paul knows he is accused of siphoning off the collection for personal use. That's why he writes in verse 20, "We intend that no one should blame us about this generous gift [charis] that we are administering, for we intend to do what is right not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of others." That's why Paul builds safeguards into collecting this offering. He wants to guard against any charge of financial impropriety. He refuses to handle the money. Instead, he entrusts the collection to three dependable Christian brothers. They're not only Paul's trusted friends and colleagues (8:23), but they are also well-regarded by the church in Corinth. Titus is the only one mentioned by name in verse 16. The second brother, in verses 18-19, although never identified, is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. Since he is recognized this way, it is likely the church in Corinth already knows his identity. The third brother also remains anonymous. He is described in verse 22 as having zeal for the faith and scrupulous in handling money, so it is likely his identity is well-known as well.

I entitled this sermon Generosity with Integrity. This passage speaks volumes about the need for the church to handle money with integrity.

Financial misconduct undermines the gospel we profess.

When it comes to discriminating true from false prophets, Jesus said, "By your fruits you shall know them." Perhaps Jesus would say of the church today, "By your budgets you shall know them." Beware of churches that are not forthcoming in their use of money. How ironic that the devil in Scripture is portrayed as one who hides in the dark and resists the light. Christians have the right and duty to insist on financial transparency in churches. Transparency fosters trust. That's why this church is intentional about publishing a full accounting of how we allocate every dime collected in this church. What we give to mission, how much I am compensated or how much it costs to heat this sanctuary are all a matter of public record.

Paul concludes chapter 8, "Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love" (8:24). Love results in generosity. What provokes grooms to spend thousands of dollars on engagement rings? What provokes grandparents to lavish gifts on their grandchildren? What provokes people to stand in line on opening day and lay down top dollar to buy the Call of Duty Black Ops video game, which set an opening day sales record of \$360 million dollars in the U.S. and United Kingdom alone. Love isn't stingy

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about counting the cost in time or money. Love results in generosity.

I read about a couple who shelled out \$33,000 to buy a burgundy and gold mini bus to replace their former party van. Their van came equipped with a horn that blares, "Hail to the Redskins." The satellite TV that has been installed in their van enables them to catch the post-game analysis as they leave Fed Ex Field after the game. They spend \$200 on food and beverage for every tailgate. Their seats at club level cost them \$6000 for the season. They also purchased two upper-deck seats for \$1400 to entertain family members and friends. Each game, they shell out \$35 for parking. Did I mention they are decked out from head to toe in Redskins paraphernalia? Their entire wardrobe is festooned in Redskins colors and logos. The jerseys they wear cost a minimum of \$100.

I'm reading this article and muttering to myself, What's wrong with these people? Why would people spend so much money this way? The answer is rather simple. They love the Redskins. We don't scrimp on things we love. Love results in generosity.

I managed to memorize a single Bible passage when I took confirmation class as a seventh grader. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him

should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God so loved that he gave....

I'm inviting you today to do two things. I'm encouraging you today to receive God's love. You don't have to earn this love. Indeed, you can't earn it. It's not even for sale. God's love is already graciously offered to us through Jesus Christ as sheer gift. Have you received the gift? Have you professed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life?

If you have received the gift, then give the gift. We become grace receivers in order to become grace givers. Love results in generosity. Let us become generous toward people who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ ...generous toward new immigrants... generous to those who are addicted... generous toward the poor...generous with those who are unemployed or underemployed...generous toward those who are grieving...generous toward those who are hurting.

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