

## **Overcoming a reluctance toward giving**

September 27

Good morning, I hope all is well wherever you are; watching from your home or office or school. It's been so long since I've been able to see most of you so I wanted to give you a quick update. Michele and I are doing quite well. We're both healthy and working from home. And while we try to connect in small groups with close friends and family, we're mostly alone - just the two of us and have been since the end of March. In related news: I've replaced my entire wardrobe with sweatpants, tshirts, and hoodies. I can no longer tell the difference between a weekday and weekend. And my closest friends are a handful of birds and the Amazon delivery driver. If I go more than 3 days without some kind of package being delivered to the house, I start to get anxious.

Just this week, I met a major COVID milestone. I'm now able to feed the chipmunks in my backyard right out of the palm of my hand.

That should give you an idea about the current state of my mental health.

All joking aside, I think our series on generous living is timely because right now as we self-contain our regular social patterns to small groups or perhaps fewer, the focus is all on ourselves. It's a time where I believe we can easily become self-absorbed simply due to the nature of protecting ourselves and families and restrictions imposed on our communities for the sake of public health.

But as people of the Kingdom of God, we must always be looking out for others. Especially now, we need to be reminded that we're called to a generous life.

Last week, Pastor Lisa pointed us to the story of the widow's mite where Jesus commends a poor widow who was considered great not because of the amount of her offering to the temple but because she gave all she had.

Pastor Lisa went on to explain that generosity of resources is a signal of someone who 1. Trusts God and 2. Honors God.

Today we're going to take a look at the often quoted phrase from 2 Corinthians 9, "God loves a cheerful giver." We're going to spend just a few moments with Paul's letter to the Corinthians in a section labeled "Generosity Encouraged."

The briefest of background is this: Paul is sending Titus to take up an offering from the church in Corinth to be delivered to the church in Jerusalem - which was greatly

struggling. The church in Corinth was so eager to give, that reports of their enthusiasm was having a contagious effect on the churches just north of them in Macedonia. Paul's been bragging about it - but now it's time to actually take up the collection.

And so the whole thing has been hyped up and he pauses to remind the people, who are by no means well off, that their generosity should remain an issue of the heart and not because of all the hype.

And in that message, is one of the most helpful descriptions of what generous living should look like.

6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 9 As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;  
their righteousness endures forever.”

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Back in 2006 there was a movie that came out called *The Break-Up*. I don't know if you remember it but it was a romantic comedy about Brook and Gary who have a strained relationship and therefore break-up and hilarity ensues. In one of the early scenes, the couple is having an argument about doing the dishes - Brook wants help, and Gary wants to leave them until morning. Perhaps you've had a similar argument in your house.

Gary relents and rolls his eyes and says, “fine! I'll help you with the dishes.” Brook responds with “you know what? Nevermind. I don't want that.” And Gary says, “I thought you wanted my help with the dishes?!” and Brook says, “I want you to *want* to do the dishes.” And Gary says, “why would I want to do dishes.”

I mean, this is really philosophical stuff.

Playfully, we quote this all the time in our house. I want you to want to do the dishes.

Do you see how this is related to our scripture? Let's look at that particular verse again: Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

I want you to *want* to do the dishes.

I want you to want to give.

It's not a matter of the action - and to be clear in either case, in cleaning or giving, both are great on their own, but what is going on in the heart is what matters to God. In fact, Paul states it very clearly - God loves the cheerful giver - the one who wants to give.

So what kind of giver are you? Are you a cheerful giver? Are you reluctant? Do you often feel like giving isn't really for you - at least maybe not at this time? Maybe you think if God wanted you to give your money away, he'd have given more to you in the first place!

Whenever I read or hear "God loves a cheerful giver" I always cringe a little because I'm more of a reluctant giver. Which is precisely why I wanted to deliver a message about giving. Not because I'm so good at it, but because I've struggled with it and I've learned how to overcome my reluctance.

And so as we get into the practical part of this message, I'm directing this toward the reluctant giver or perhaps those who don't practice generosity of resources. If you're already a cheerful giver, Paul has a wonderful message for you already: "8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

For the rest of us I want to share with you what has worked for me, and perhaps it can work for you.

Generosity isn't a finance or logistics issue, it's a motivation or heart issue

Practical ways to help overcome reluctance

1. Ask yourself the right kind of question

About 10 years ago, I got in kind of a wonky relationship with giving - even to the church who paid my salary. I rejected the notion of discipline feeling like God only wanted my

obedience when my heart was in it. So with generosity, I wanted to give only when I felt being led to give. That way I could be sure that my actions were always from the heart and not in some kind of legalistic territory. I expected that motivation would come from either an internal desire to be generous or because God would give the motivation to me. I kind of flipped the cheerful giver on its head thinking: I'm only going to give if I'm cheerful about it. After a few years of doing this, I noticed that my giving became less and less frequent... because wouldn't you know it, I rarely FELT like giving away my money.

When Michele I got married, like I assume most people do, we got into a discussion about how much money we were going to give to the church. So I dropped my inverse-cheerful giver philosophy on her. She was clearly confused by this and countered by simply asking, "don't you think that God wants us to be generous to the church?" Well...yes. I did think that.

Now that wasn't the end of the discussion, in fact, it was just the beginning. And we're constantly in dialog about what we want to give, and how we want our money to bless others. And those discussions aren't always joyful!

But the beginning of change for me started with asking a different kind of question. Instead of asking, "Do I feel like giving this time," or "am I being called to give this week," the question became "what kind of person do I want to be?"

As a follower of Jesus, I want to be the kind of person who when compelled to go one mile offers to go two. I want my concern for others to outweigh the concern I have for myself. I want to give to those who ask and not turn away those who wish to borrow.

And if I strive to be that person through generosity of spirit and time and resources, I expect that God will fill me up with the goodness and joy he's promised to those who do so. And that's not a vain expectation - it's what Paul says God will do! "You will be enriched in every way!"

Now just because you are asking the right kind of question doesn't mean giving will suddenly be easy. That's why an important part of overcoming your reluctance is to make a plan.

## 2. Create a Plan that works for you

I almost wish one of the Ten Commandments was "Thou shalt open a spreadsheet and draft a budget for thine household income." I'd have a really good sermon to preach

then because one of the biggest helps to me in overcoming my reluctant giving was creating a plan - it helped take some of the negative emotion out of it.

In our house, I'm the one who primarily wants to save. Generosity is tough for me because giving away money seems counterintuitive to my desire to save. Michele is the one in the house for whom generosity seems natural. Early in our marriage, as I've already alluded to, we were trying to figure out how to communicate our values and habits and goals with money. Michele would operate with a budget that I never looked at. I told her I wasn't concerned as long as we were saving money - and we were, mainly by default because our two incomes had become one. So I was pretty much out of the loop.

The only time I'd start asking questions is when Michele would say, hey I had to buy a wedding gift for my friend and I got this card for my mom and I gave money to someone at the intersection of blah blah blah and I bought us tickets to a fundraiser dinner and I thought we could send a little extra money to somebody this month and I could just feel my blood rising. And I would blurt out something like: "why are we wasting our money on gift cards and chachkis and go-fund-mes and overpriced coffee?!" And the arguing would begin. And for the most part, I'd have to walk back my statements. I didn't really believe that it was a waste of money and after some further apologies and discussions I'd have to admit that I wanted us to be generous in those ways, but it always felt out of control.

Then Michele and I took the Dave Ramsey class "Financial Peace University" and I got completely geeked out on doing the budget. I went from casual indifference toward a budget to a laser-focused interest in our budget. And it freed me to be more generous. I'm serious about that and I can't be more practical than this: if you want help in living generously, make. A. plan.

For those of us who are reluctant givers, a plan offers freedom from negative emotions that always pushes back on charitable giving. So now, when Michele tells me she is buying a baby gift for the neighbors, I think great - put that in the budget - and I'm genuinely excited to spend that money on others because that's precisely what we've set it aside for. Ironically, setting a boundary for generosity, freed me to give cheerfully.

What happens to a lot of people is they make the decision, but then they don't make a plan. And pretty soon, emotions get involved and a fight breaks out and suddenly you wonder if charitable giving is for you. So make a plan. The plan should be according to both what you WANT to give and informed by what you CAN give.

Again, Paul's words (from chapter 8): For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

So even if you've started asking the right kinds of questions, your eagerness to give needs to be tempered by a plan.

I have some friends who got jazzed up about giving and so they just dropped a large amount into the offering one Sunday. And I think they felt pretty good about it. Then at the end of the month, they were wondering if they'd have the money to pay all the bills. Something like that can really drain the joy out of giving because without a plan we might be inviting negative emotions on a regular basis.

There are times when we're called to give outside our plan - to give sacrificially. We'll be called on to be generous when we aren't sure the money, the time, or the emotional strength is there. And in those moments we hope that God lifts us up and helps us rise to the occasion.

That's why the third and maybe the most important thing I've included to help me overcome my reluctance toward giving is prayer.

3. Ask God to be involved - make him an equal partner in your thoughts and communication and strategy of generosity.

One of my most common prayers is that God would make me more generous. I recognize my shortcomings in this area probably above all else. Often as we sit down for dinner, I pray thanksgiving over God's provision, I ask that he extend his provision to those who don't have what we have, and I ask that God use us to help bridge the gap.

When you struggle with motivation, pray

When you make your plan, pray.

When you celebrate the joy of generosity, pray.

When you are tempted to skimp on your giving, pray!

Lately, I have a keen sense of time getting away from me. As we spend weeks and months away from loved ones shut up in our houses knowing we can't get this time back - it really creates a sort of existential crisis. I can sense my opportunities dwindling and I know I have much work to do to become one who embodies generous living. And so I pray that God would redeem what time I have left for his Kingdom - sometimes, in spite of myself.

If you want to be more generous in life and love then be on your knees in prayer, my friends. Ask God to give you what you do not have. Until the generous life flows out of you naturally, keep asking God to grant you a heart for others, the opportunities to bless the Kingdom of God, and the means to do so.

One last time, Paul's words: And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Now let's pray together.

Lord God, may we lean on the assurance of your grace and your promise of blessing as we seek to extend generosity toward others. Forgive us for the times we only think of ourselves. Give us the courage to act faithfully in the moments when our generosity is put to the test. Make us into the people you'd have us be. Give us all that we need today so that we may share it with others tomorrow. I ask these things in the name of your Son Jesus, Amen.