

Session 5



Generosity

THE POINT

God's generous grace moves us to be generous.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

You've got to love the stories of philanthropists—those who give away large sums of money through donations, trusts, and foundations. For example, Warren Buffet gives away 99 percent of his wealth. Considering that, in 2023, he made over \$37 million every day,¹ his pledge to give away 99 percent² certainly gets our attention.

You may be thinking, *If I had that kind of money, I could be generous too!*

That sounds so noble and sacrificial, but if you had \$135 billion (Warren Buffet's net worth³) and chose to live on a mere one percent, you would still have \$1.3 billion to scrape by on!

That's a lot of money to give, but is that same as being generous?

While we might commend an agnostic like Buffet for his charitable giving, generosity has nothing to do with the amount. Generosity is a heart issue, and we are called to a life of generosity as followers of Christ. In this session, we'll see how God's abundant grace moves us toward a generous lifestyle.

QUESTION 1:

Who do you see as a poster child for generosity?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-2

¹ We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia: ² During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Character counts, but the only counting that some are doing these days is self-calculated. Staying in your own lane can become a rationalization for wearing blinders and ignoring others with a legitimate need of help.

Paul wrote a letter to his spiritual “brothers and sisters” (v. 1) living in the town of Corinth. It was a relatively new and thriving boom town where highly motivated people looking for opportunity came to make their fortune. Though once destroyed, Corinth was rebuilt by the famous Roman emperor Julius Caesar in 46 BC. It quickly became the third most notable city in the Roman empire.⁴

We can assume that the city’s culture infiltrated the church. Paul’s audience would have included some up and comers of the day. To these types of people, a message of generosity was delivered. That message came wrapped in a human example.

The churches of Macedonia were shining examples of generosity, but not because they had deep pockets and lived lives of ease. It was the exact opposite. In verse 2, Paul gives three relevant observations about the believers in Philippi and Thessalonica:

- **They were being severely persecuted for their faith.** From their infancy as churches, both congregations experienced opposition (Acts 16:20; 17:20). Paul affirmed that in his letters to them (Phil. 1:27-30; 1 Thess. 3:3-4)
- **They experienced deep poverty.** Paul picked his words in the original language very carefully. He didn’t just say they were in poverty but adds that it was *deep* poverty or, as one commentator puts it, “rock-bottom poverty.” It doesn’t describe just missing a paycheck or two.
- **They lived in abundant joy.** Their affliction had not squelched their joy. Their circumstances were bleak, but they weren’t. In this they imitated Paul’s own experience.

It’s hard to wrap your mind around these seeming contradictions. Paul knew exactly from where their amazing joy and generosity came. It was their experience of the grace of God.

Just two chapters previously, Paul wrote inspiringly about God’s grace in salvation (2 Cor. 5:16–6:2). God’s goodness to rebellious sinners overflowed. The Macedonians heard the gospel and received the grace of God that brings salvation. And then what happened?

Just as the wealth of God's goodness flowed into their hearts, so a wealth of generosity began to flow from them. Their joy at what God had done for them brought a fullness to their lives that material deprivation couldn't exhaust. They were overwhelmed by the grace of God.

Can you remember a time when you were overwhelmed? Many times, it's related to work and the responsibilities of our job. I've known people who were inundated with a variety of illnesses in a relatively short period. Perhaps you recall a time when you were swamped with one problem after another. If you can, then you know the danger of being overwhelmed is that you simply overreact, sometimes in a destructive way. It's as if you couldn't help but respond.

Don't get me wrong. The Macedonian Christians weren't robots. They chose to be generous in a time of difficulty. But God's grace

was overwhelming to them and so they gave. It wasn't because they had plenty to give; they didn't. But they had been given so much from God. I can almost hear one of them say, "How can I keep from giving to others when Jesus has given so much to me?"

Generosity doesn't depend on having financial wealth, but rather a deep spiritual commitment to the Lord. It's the response of those to whom the grace of God has become real.

QUESTION 2:

What is the relationship between joy and generosity?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:3-6

³ I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, ⁴ they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, ⁵ and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will. ⁶ So we urged Titus that just as he had begun, so he should also complete among you this act of grace.

The specific object of the collection Paul received from the churches isn't certain. It's possible it was directed towards the relief of believers in Jerusalem and/or Judea (Acts 11:29, 12:25; Rom. 15:27). It's also possible Paul was referring to some other relief project for fellow believers. Either way, the response from the Macedonian believers was astounding.

The popular expression "give until it hurts" barely describes this situation. They didn't give

out of their abundance but out of their poverty. Neither did they give under duress. Paul made it clear to the Corinthians he hadn't manipulated or pressured these sacrificial gifts.

Sometimes giving to a special offering can feel like an obligation. That pressure isn't just external but internal. The voice in your head says, "Well, I guess I better give something to the love offering the church is collecting," but that sounds more like guilt than grace talking.

The real question is: “Do I *have* to give, or do I *get* to give?” The Macedonians saw giving as a privilege. They begged for the opportunity to participate in Paul’s ministry through giving.

There are two kinds of giving, “just” giving and Jesus giving. In verse 5, Paul described the Macedonian believers as giving not “just as we had hoped.” The context tells us what Paul had hoped for, a simple willingness to give something. But they went further.

QUESTION 3:

Why do our motivations matter when it comes to giving?

This reminds us of something important about generosity. It’s easy to stop short and say, “Well, that’s enough.” We can make it a mere financial transaction. And when we do, our tendency is to give less than what we could and to rationalize it by stating, “Oh well, that’s close enough!” On the other hand, Jesus’s giving is different. In some ways, it isn’t about the money.

With generosity, the question is, “Have I first given myself to the Lord?” Putting Jesus first

transforms our giving. To talk about something being “first” isn’t an occurrence in time but rather a value and a priority. A failure to be generous is a problem of giving ourselves to God.

Sometimes our spiritual leaders must help us see this. Using some relational tactfulness, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to complete their initial enthusiasm to give to the collection. He could have scolded them for their delinquency, but instead he appealed to the goodness of God. The highest spiritual attainments are accomplished more through a pull than they are through a push. Giving falls into this category.

If we only remember one thing about generosity, it needs to be this: It’s an act of grace that leaves no room for self-congratulations. When our focus is on something other than the Lord, giving can become a platform for empty pride. But when it flows from a deep sense of gratitude for all that God has done for you, then it reflects His wonderful grace.

QUESTION 4:

How have you learned to be generous?

2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-9

⁷ Now as you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this act of grace. ⁸ I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Engage

GENEROSITY CHECK

Do a self-assessment of your own level of generosity. Place an X where you think it best fits. Then ask God to help you in areas of weakness.

**When I have the opportunity to be generous,
do I view it as a “get to” or a “got to”?**

NEVER — RARELY — SOMETIMES — OFTEN — ALWAYS

Do I give according to my ability?

NEVER — RARELY — SOMETIMES — OFTEN — ALWAYS

Do I seek to give “even beyond” my ability?

NEVER — RARELY — SOMETIMES — OFTEN — ALWAYS

Do I see an opportunity to share the needs of others as a “privilege?”

NEVER — RARELY — SOMETIMES — OFTEN — ALWAYS

Do I give as a response to the generosity I’ve received through Jesus?

NEVER — RARELY — SOMETIMES — OFTEN — ALWAYS

My Prayer:

Paul wasn't using the Macedonian's example to start a generosity contest between them and the Corinthians. But he was helping them think about this vital spiritual discipline. Even the way Paul went about it was generous. Harshly scolding people for a failure to give according to God's grace is oxymoronic. It defeats the purpose of highlighting the mercy of God.

Some commentators seem to question whether Paul employed sarcasm in verse 7, when he described the Corinthians as excelling. I don't believe that was the case. He wasn't speaking tongue in cheek but was truly affirming their spiritual giftedness, something he had done in a previous letter (1 Cor. 1:5-7).

All of this highlights a significant principle of the Christian life: giftedness is not the same thing as character. We need to hear this lesson in the church. The Corinthians possessed the spiritual gifts of faith, speech, and knowledge, and they were diligent in their exercise. But they clearly weren't as generous as Paul knew they needed to be.

Leading worship, speaking publicly, and inspiring others are all needed in every church. These visible and public ministries do matter in the life and function of a congregation. But they don't replace the need for godly character, of which generosity is a sign.

Paul acknowledged the public giftedness of the church at Corinth, but he celebrated the abundant, sacrificial generosity of the Macedonian believers. In this we see what's truly essential among the body of Christ.

Character counts. Generosity matters. We can preach the gospel eloquently and we should. We can sing the gospel beautifully. But neither

of these expressions test the genuineness of our love for Christ like generosity does. Just as we try to excel in the exercise of our talents, we should also strive for excellence in our generosity.

How do we do that? Drawing upon what they already knew about His grace, Paul highlighted the generous sacrifice of Christ in His incarnation. The wealth of Christ refers to His unlimited and pre-existent status as God. He was "rich" in that He was fully God, possessing all the attributes of deity. Yet, as we saw in a previous study on humility in Philippians 2, Christ was willing to surrender His residence in heaven and come to earth on our behalf.

Because of what Christ did—not simply in coming to earth but in dying for our sins on the cross—we came to possess a wealth beyond our comprehension. The riches we enjoy are spiritual in nature—abundant forgiveness, mercy, and hope. When God forgives us, He doesn't just forgive us a little bit. It's more than we could ever truly hope to experience.

As the enormity of Christ's grace becomes real to me, my heart is crushed. As I consider this great exchange—how Christ became poor for me so that I could become rich—I'm overwhelmed by how blessed I've become. A lifestyle of generosity then becomes my natural response.

QUESTION 5:

What truths about God encourage you to be generous?

LIVE IT OUT

God's generous grace moves us to be generous. Choose one or more of the following applications.

- **Study.** Do a deep dive topical study on the grace of God using this question as a guide: "What's so amazing about God's grace?"
- **Write.** List the traits of what it means to be generous. Create a checklist of the qualities and characteristics of someone who is generous. Share your findings with someone you trust.
- **Ask.** Identify one person who you consider to be generous. Don't simply use financial giving as an indicator but look for those who freely share their time, their attention, or their ideas with others. Generosity in one area often extends to another. Ask the person some version of this question: "What moves you to share things in your life with others the way that you do?"



1. finance.yahoo.com/news/warren-buffett-makes-37-26-183952022.html
2. givingpledge.org/pledger?pledgerId=177
3. www.businessinsider.com/how-warren-buffett-spends-money-net-worth
4. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness*, Preaching the Word series, "Exalted Identities" (chapter 1).