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Sermon 28 February 2021

Giving 4: Giving Wealth (2 Corinthians 9)

- Good morning church—it is so good to be with you today and we are so glad that you are with us—may God give us ears to hear what we need to hear this morning as we open ourselves to Him and to the good news of His word
- We are wrapping up our four-week sermon series called a Generous Life—The Beauty in Giving, today—and we'll be reviewing the series tonight at our Second Helping Bible Study—we do hope you'll join us for that
- For the last four weeks we have been talking about what it means to live a generous life—a life that is characterised by a willingness to share the blessings that God has provided to each of us with the church and with others, to make the resources that we have been given available for the work of the Kingdom of God
- Now we have covered a lot of ground over the past few weeks, and so I want to begin today by reviewing a few points that we have learned, or if you already knew them, some points that we have been reminded of in this series.
- The first point that we have been reminded of as we have worked our way through this series is this: We give thanks because God is generous and provides for us and all of creation. We saw this during Week one when we examined the way that having an attitude of gratitude is a pre-requisite to living a generous life. And because God provides for us, because God meets our needs no matter what our situation is, we can be thankful in every circumstance—we can be not only thankful but generous,

because we have a perspective of abundance and not of scarcity—we need not be fearful that our own needs will not be met if we are generous with our resources

- The second point that we have been reminded of is this: We are called to imitate a generous God, and to be the Body of Christ that gives. We saw this in Week two when we talked about giving love, giving, and having, *agape*, and so as we saw last week, the church as the Body of Christ and each of us as members within it, are called, as we read in Ephesians 5, to be imitators of God and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us
- Thirdly—the third thing we have seen over the last few weeks: we are called to do good—we are commanded to love our neighbour as ourselves as we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; we are called to meet the needs of others and to build the Kingdom. We read in Ephesians last week that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” That’s why John Wesley tells his fellow Christians that what they are to be about doing with their days and their resources is simply this: “Do all the good you can.”
- And finally, the fourth point we have been reminded of these last 4 weeks—and we’ll unpack this further today, is this:
- We are not only **called** to do good, to love our neighbours as ourselves, to give and to be generous as God is generous, but we are also equipped to do good—we are provided with resources not only for our own needs but for the needs of others—God doesn’t just command us to be givers—but He also provides us with the gifts that we are to give
- And so Paul could remind the church at Corinth, as we saw two weeks ago, that their gifts are not given to them simply for their own edification, but to edify others—but

this is true not only of spiritual gifts, not only of abilities and knowledge and powers, but this is true also of every resource we have that we could possibly give to others—our talents, and our time, and our skills, and our energy, and our wisdom, and our love—every resource that we draw upon to meet our needs and the needs of others is a gift from God—

- but I can imagine some folks thinking already “God didn’t give me anything, everything I have I had to work for”—let me remind you who gives you the ability to work, who gave you the breath in your lungs and the blood in your veins, whose grace is the reason—the only reason—that you wake up in the morning and have 24 hours in each day to do whatever it is that you choose to do—
- whatever resources we have, we have because God gives them to us—and God calls us to use them not only to meet our own needs but to meet the needs of others, to be part of the building of the Kingdom, to be the body of Christ and to participate in the redemption of all of creation
- And one of those resources is wealth. Wealth. Possessions. Valuables. Physical and natural and financial resources. Goods.
- When we think of wealth many of us think immediately of money. To be wealthy, we might think, is to have a lot of money—to be flush with cash.
- But the truth of the matter when you really think about it, is that money is not wealth—money is a way to transfer wealth. Money is a tool that societies have developed and have used and continue to use to represent debt. Money is really a system of debts—because money itself isn’t what is “valuable” in itself, but it has been assigned value by an authority—by a king or an emperor or the Bank of England or the Clydesdale Bank. This “note” isn’t really “worth” five pounds in and of

itself—but it’s a promissory note that says that there are assets behind it that guarantee that it can be exchanged for other things that have a certain value assigned to them. Those things are the real “wealth,” not the banknote. And that value can change based on a lot of different variables—an ounce of gold or a certain house in a certain condition can increase or decrease in value, or the price of a bag of potatoes may vary—the house and the bag of potatoes stay the same—they remain the same asset—the same “wealth”—but the “value” in terms of money can fluctuate. A sack of potatoes is a sack of potatoes whether we say it’s worth 2 pounds or 20 pounds.

- And money can, in certain instances, be of no value at all—when the American Civil War ended, Confederate money was worthless, because the authority that guaranteed its value ceased to exist—because money isn’t wealth—it’s a way to transfer wealth within a certain system—
- I can demonstrate this idea quite simply by going to Tesco and trying to pay for my groceries with a twenty dollar bill. It doesn’t work because I have to be within a certain economic system for those dollars to be recognised as having value—in this place that money is not legal tender. I’ve heard about some Scots who’ve had this experience down in England, too.
- Now why do I say all this? Because when we really understand how money works, and the difference between money and wealth, and the fact that the value of money is entirely dependent upon earthly authorities and the fluctuations of markets and political powers—then we can begin to understand why the Bible tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil—because when we fix our eyes only on the devices of economic systems and the mechanisms of debt and profit and inflation

and deflation—that is, when we buy into the world’s standards of value and ownership—we risk forgetting what wealth is, and who the wealth of the world belongs to—Jesus reminds us of that when he says “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and unto God that which is God’s” because Caesar’s picture may be inscribed on that money, or a US president’s, or the Queen of England’s, but the wealth that it is used to transfer belongs to God—

- Both the Psalmist and the Apostle Paul remind us—the whole earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof, and they that dwell therein.
- So when we talk about giving wealth, we ought to remember that the wealth of the whole world belongs to God and is given to us to make use of for our own needs and the needs of others—and when we talk about giving wealth we’re not just talking about giving money, transferring wealth—because whether a person writes a check or donates cash or gives a sack of potatoes, or a gas hob, or a food processor or a bicycle or a new church sanctuary, they are giving wealth—wealth that has been given to them by a generous God.
- Now let’s take a look at our scripture for today. Pastor Tasha read to us from the Apostle Paul’s second epistle to the church at Corinth.
- We have already seen in this series how Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in First Corinthians—we talked about that in the second week of this series—and we saw how there were some divisions and some misunderstandings among the believers in Corinth, particularly about spiritual gifts—folks were a little over-interested in the gift of tongues, and they might have been getting the least little bit proud of themselves for the gifts that they had, and they were tending to forget that they were all members of the same body, the body of Christ, and that every member, no

matter what spiritual gifts they had been given, was as important as everyone else—and the reason they had spiritual gifts, Paul reminded them, was for the common good—for the building up of the Kingdom, the edification of the church—and in fact Paul went further and told the Corinthian church what mattered more than what gifts you had or even how they were demonstrated, was love—he said if you didn't have love then your gifts and your abilities and even your sacrifices were pointless and came to nothing.

- And when we looked at the way Paul taught these important lessons to the church at Corinth we saw how tactful he had to be, how careful with his language and his rhetoric he was, so that they understood clearly the point he was trying to make and what he was telling them to do
- And we often see in the writings of Paul what a convincing writer he can be, what mastery of language he demonstrates—how his writing flows and is well-constructed and effective—that's certainly true in FIRST Corinthians—but the SECOND epistle to the church at Corinth is, in general, a somewhat fragmented and erratic letter—even though it adheres to one central theme, the theme of Paul's ministry, it jumps around a lot—now this is probably due in no small part to the hardships and confinement that Paul was suffering as he was writing—
- but if we look at chapters 8 and 9 of the epistle, what some scholars, like Tom Wright in particular, notice, is that the language Paul uses isn't exactly fluid—it's not as pretty or as effortless as Paul's language in other places—in fact Wright describes Paul's language in chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians as “tortured” and “laboured,” even “awkward.” And Professor Wright thinks, and it makes sense, that there's a

good reason for this awkwardness—and that reason is because in chapters 8 and 9 Paul is doing some fundraising—he’s asking for money—

- And like most of us, Paul gets a little awkward in this situation—because it’s not easy for many people to ask for money—to first of all admit that they have needs and secondly to be so blatant about such an uncouth and vulgar thing as money, you know how that is—and it’s an interesting thing to notice, that even though Paul is clearly requesting some financial assistance here in these chapters, not ONCE in the whole 39 verses does he use the WORD “money” or anything even close to it—Paul uses euphemisms like “the grace” and “the deed” and “the service”—he tells the church at Corinth about “your service in this ministry”—and of course, he talks about their “partnership”—you’ll remember that we talked about partnership, “*koinonia*” during our sermon series on Philippians.
- But I find it fascinating to look at the beginning of chapter 9 and consider the way that Paul handles this situation—he basically says, beginning with verse 1: Now I don’t need to even remind you about the need to support those in ministry, because I know how eager you all are to help—in fact I’ve been bragging on you to these folks here in Macedonia, talking about how generous y’all are and how your generosity inspires others—and so I’m going to send some good Christian brothers to help prepare things—you know, with the gift that you all are giving—I mean because I wouldn’t want my bragging on you all to prove to be untrue—and of course if some of these folks from Macedonia were to come with me to see you all and it turned out that you’re not as generous as I said you were, well, that would be humiliating for me and for you too—so I’m sending my brothers ahead to make arrangements for

you all to give this “generous gift” to the ministry, so that we can keep doing what we’re called to do.

- The word that’s translated as “generous gift” in the NIV or “bountiful gift” in the NRSV there in verse 5 is another one of those euphemisms—the Greek there is “*eulogia*”—that’s where we get the word “eulogy”—the words we say about the deceased at funerals—because “eulogia” literally means “good words” and it’s a word for a blessing, or praise, or also a gift—so here again, Paul’s not mentioning “money” even though we know that’s what he’s talking about. But he’s mentioning it again, he says, so it’s clear that their gift is voluntary and not, as the NRSV says “extortion”—not compulsory.
- But as you read these first 5 verses of chapter 9, you can almost hear Paul saying these words, and you can sense the uneasiness and hesitancy and almost nervousness in what Paul is saying—
- but that changes in verse 6 when Paul shifts from the practical matter of “fundraising” to the theological matters surrounding giving and generosity—that is, when he moves from “asking for money” to reminding the church at Corinth WHY they give and how generosity works in the Kingdom of God. Paul moves from an awkward, uneasy situation to one in which he is more comfortable—because Paul is good at doing theology--he likes to speak theologically
- And so verse 6 starts like this in the NRSV: Paul says, “the point is this.” In the NIV, that’s translated as “remember this.” So Paul is letting the church at Corinth know that he’s about to tell them something worth remembering—the “point” of giving out their financial resources—their wealth—to the cause of the kingdom.

- And the first part of this point to remember is this—verse 6: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.
- This is a lesson from agriculture that any gardener knows well—if you just plant a handful of seeds you’re not going to see the same harvest as you will if you plant many handfuls
- Now I want to tell you right off the bat here what this sentence DOESN’T mean—this sentence is not all about you—or me—or any other individual—making a profit off of their contribution to the church or any other organisation—getting a personal return on their investment, an ROI—but we may be tempted to read it that way—and there are those who would tell us that this verse ought to be read in this way—but it should not.
- Back in the States there used to be some of these preachers on TV, and I guess they still are, and they would tell folks, many of whom didn’t have much to start with, maybe not even enough to get by—to meet their own needs—but these TV preachers would tell them that if they had “seed faith” and they sent in some money to their TV ministry, even if it was their last little bit, that if they sent it in then they would get **back** some of the things that they wanted—some of the things that they needed. I heard Dr William Barber talking about these preachers some time ago—he called them “shysters” –frauds and charlatans—because that whole “name it and claim it, call it and haul it” mentality has the wrong goal—that is, giving to a ministry **for a reward—particularly for the reward of the basic necessities of life--** is fundamentally flawed, because God is not some divine vending machine—you don’t put your money in and choose the candy bar you want to get back—

- if a person is giving because they are seeking some things, then they are not giving out of love, they are giving out of desire, or maybe out of desperation—but we don't give because we are seeking things—things are not the reason we give--Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that we don't need to worry about things, all these things we need to get by—food and clothing and shelter—we don't need to give in order to seek these things—no, Jesus said “seek ye FIRST the Kingdom of God and all these THINGS will be added to you”
- The harvest that Paul is talking about is not a bunch of things that we might get BACK—we're not buying God's blessing when we give—this is not a *quid pro quo* situation—we don't have to beg God to give us the necessities of life or try to work out a trade with Him—no, the harvest that giving generously reaps is the work of the Kingdom—and God doesn't bless US in accordance with HOW MUCH we give—God doesn't bless us BECAUSE we gave—past tense-- no—as we will see, God blesses us SO THAT we can give—future tense—God's blessing, God's abundant provision, comes first—it's not withheld until we deposit the right amount and then released to us—it is freely given and we respond to it—we imitate it
- Now let's move on to verse 7 where Paul continues: 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.
- Now I know that there are many of us who find Paul's advice here frustrating—“each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give,”—many of us would rather not have to think about how much we are called to give—we'd rather be told—give some percentage of your income or your net worth unless you're below a certain level and then you don't have to give anything at all—but then we have the

example of the widow's mite in Mark and Luke's gospel—you'll remember that she gave out of her poverty, and the lesson there is that it's not just about what you actually "give," but it's more about what you decide to keep for yourself

- Certainly tithing is a good place to start—the practice of giving the first 10% of a person's income to the work of the church—sometimes you hear people say that the tithe is that part that belongs to God, and that's true but it's misleading, because the other 90% percent also belongs to God and we are given all 100% to use for our needs and the needs of others as good stewards
- John Wesley had some good advice concerning giving, I think—he said gain all you can—use your time wisely to earn as much as you can without causing harm to yourself or your Christian practice—gain all you can—and then give all you can
- And you might ask, "well how much IS that?" Well, it's the same amount as when Jesus says "Love the Lord with ALL your heart, and ALL your soul, and ALL your mind and strength"—it's all you can—and that is an amount that you're going to need to work out with God's help and the direction of the Holy Spirit
- You know John Wesley was as fastidious about his money as he was about his time—and throughout his life he kept his expenses at the same level that they had been at the beginning of his ministry—in his first year at Oxford, Wesley's income was 30 pounds, and his expenses were 28 pounds, leaving him 2 pounds to give away that year-- he had less than 10% to give away, because his meagre basic living expenses took more than 90% of his income—but as Wesley's ministry developed and he earned additional income from things like the books he wrote—by the way Wesley's books earned him the modern equivalent of about 4 million pounds-- eventually

Wesley was giving away 98% of his annual income and living on 2%—because he kept his living expenses at about the same as when he started out at Oxford.

- Now do not go out and tell your friends “Pastor Steve said we should give away 98% of our income”—that is not what I’m saying—but I am saying that if you are one of those people who likes specifics beyond just “give all you can” and you want an exact numerical range by which you can judge whether you’re giving enough—whether you’re giving as much as you OUGHT to—well, then I suggest using John Wesley for comparison, and if the percentage of your income that you use not for your own needs but to meet the needs of others is in the range from “less than 10% to 98%,” and you honestly feel that you’re doing all God is asking and empowering you to do, then you can be happy with that
- And Paul’s point here in verse 7 is that you ought to be happy with your giving—you ought to be a cheerful giver—if your giving makes you anxious or fearful or if you give because you feel obligated to, then that’s not cheerful giving—God is not like some Mafia goon that you see in gangster movies who shows up to collect “protection” from people in the neighbourhood—God’s not saying “really nice life you got here, it’d be a real shame if anything untoward were to happen to it—now pay up”—no, giving should be cheerful
- The Greek word that Paul uses there that is translated as “cheerful” is “*hilaros*” and yes that is where the English word “hilarious” comes from—and if you think about “hilarious giving”—that’s about as far away from grudging or obligated giving as you can imagine—Paul is not talking about the kind of giving that says, “well, you’ve convinced me,” or, “well, if I have to, I guess I’ll give,” or even “I’m happy to help” – no Paul’s not talking about being in agreement or being pleased or even being

somewhat amused—he’s talking about giving that is “hilarious.” Giving that makes you laugh out loud, makes your eyes water and makes you shake your head and say “that’s hilarious.”

- And the reason we can be that happy, that overjoyed, that ecstatic about giving is because we can be assured that God is able to and will supply the resources not only for our own needs but for our giving. Verses 8, 9 and 10 basically all say the same thing
- Listen to Paul’s words here: verse 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.
- And then, in verse 11, here’s the promise to the church at Corinth and for each and every one of us today: You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion
- You WILL BE enriched in every way—God will provide the resources, the abundant resources so that, as we read in verse 8—in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.
- And as we have mentioned, what is being described here is not God’s REACTION to giving—this does not say that you will be rewarded FOR your PAST generosity—no, that’s not how **this** language works—this says “you will be enriched, in every way” SO THAT you can be generous on every occasion”—

- so that you can be generous when? Every once in a while? At Christmastime, at the end of the year, when you feel guilty because you watched some ad on TV about starving kids in Africa—yes, sure all of those, and also on every other occasion—every time a need arises that you have been given the resources to meet—every time you hear of an opportunity to give and you think “well I’ve got that to spare, I don’t need that, I can share that”—whatever it is-- you WILL BE made rich SO THAT you can be generous ON EVERY OCCASION. That is a tremendous promise—that is a hilarious proposition—can you imagine? God can. And this is how giving wealth works.
- But not just wealth, not just money and material goods—this is how giving our time and our talents and our knowledge and our friendship and our prayers and our thanksgivings and our gifts and our love—this is how giving works—this is what it means to live a generous life—you will be enriched IN EVERY WAY so that you can be generous on every occasion.
- In the days and weeks and months to come, let’s watch for ways to give, let’s be sensitive to opportunities for giving—let’s pray about it, let’s ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and our ears and our hearts—you’ll find ways to give on our website, in the church newsletter, in the news, in conversations with folks, in your prayer time—if we are willing there will be no shortage of needs that we can be a part of meeting—we can build the Kingdom—let’s be generous on every occasion—let’s live a generous life.