December 5/6, 2009

Sowing and Reaping

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Pastor Bryan Clark

About a year or so ago, Patti came up with the idea that she wanted some chickens. She thought it'd be fun to have farm-fresh eggs. I thought, "*Well, whatever,*" so I converted an outhouse into a chicken coop and last spring we went to a place that shall remain nameless, to pick up our little chickens. I remember asking the gentleman the question, "Are you sure these are all hens, because we want eggs?" He looked at me like, "Well, duh, what else would they be?" "Okay, didn't mean to offend you; just asking." So we get home and the weeks turned into months and we started to notice that it seems like two of these chickens look different than the third one. So they continued to grow and the difference became more obvious. One day Patti and I were out doing some yard work and there came a *crow* from the chicken coop. Patti and I both looked at each other and I said, "I believe that was a crow." Well sure enough, they matured and we had two roosters and one hen. So we thought, "*Well, whatever. You know they'll have chicks and hatch out and we'll keep the hens.*" Well, growing up in the city I was always taught that the roosters crow at sun-up. But I have to tell you; that's a myth. They crow all day; they crow all night and it is highly obnoxious. (Laughter) Now there may be some of you that like that sound; I don't happen to be numbered among those. It's irritating and the more mature these roosters got, the more piercing that sound was. The chicken coop was right next to my shop and my shop is kind of like my *oasis*. But every time I'd go to my shop, the rooster would crow the entire time I was in the shop and I thought, "*This isn't fair; this rooster is chasing me off my own place.*" So one Friday I said to Patti, "Honey, I love you. You can give these roosters away; you can let them go free; you can do whatever you want with them but if they're still there on Monday, they must die." (Laugher) Now I'm not going to tell you what happened. I'm only going to tell you that now we have one hen and, as of about a month ago, she's finally starting laying eggs. I think she was traumatized so it took awhile to get over it. (Laugher)

But here's the point (this is a very simple formula): *One hen equals one egg.* Do the math— two hens would mean two eggs; three hens would mean three eggs. You kind of get where we're going here: a hundred hens—a hundred eggs. It's not hard is it? Are we sure that we understand that—because Paul is not so sure. It's what he wants to talk to us about.

If you have a Bible, turn to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 9. Last week we looked at 2 Corinthians, Chapter 8—8 and 9 are together. The Corinthians understood that the Jewish Christians, down in Judea because of a famine, were struggling just to survive. So they came up with a wonderful idea of taking an offering and, out of their generosity, sending the offering down to Judea in order to help these believers survive—a wonderful idea! Paul shared the idea with the churches in Macedonia—that would be Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea—and they were so energized that they too wanted to contribute. The problem is that now a year has passed and the Corinthians have yet to put forth a single penny, so Paul is encouraging them to follow through. They had a very generous idea but now they need to follow through on their gift.

We pick up the discussion, then, in Chapter 9, Verse 1:

> **For it is superfluous for me to write to you about this ministry to the saints; for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the Macedonians, namely, that Achaia has been prepared since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them.** (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 9:1-2)

Now again the offering was for the saints, which reminds me I need to go on just a little bit of a rabbit trail. What was true two thousand years ago is true today—that there are always people among us and around us that have needs and part of our calling, as Christians, is to be sensitive to that and help meet those needs. Now we all understand that this last year has been a difficult year for a lot of people and this time of year can be very difficult for people. All that to say—we as a church want to help! The only thing we lack, oftentimes, is being aware of the need. So whether that's a family you know, an individual you know—perhaps it might even be you yourself—if there is a need, we're happy to help meet that need. *We just need to know*! So this is a good time to remind ourselves that if you know people who have a need, all you need to do is call the office. They'll walk you through the process and we're more than happy to try to help people to meet basic needs this time of year. So just make a note of that—what was true then is still true today. People have needs; it's part of our responsibility to help meet those needs.

When Paul says**...it is superfluous...**he means it's really *not necessary*. He's giving them the benefit of the doubt. "*It's really not necessary for me to remind you to do this generous thing because I know that's your intention. I know that's your heart; it was your idea. It's been a year now; it's probably a good time to follow through on your commitmen*t." He does remind them that the churches in Macedonia—and again we learned last week that the churches in Macedonia were experiencing fiery persecution—they were rock-bottom poor and yet, out of their poverty, they gave generously. Paul says they gave according to their riches and beyond, which means they gave more than what could reasonably be expected of them. He even tells us that they actually *begged* for the privilege of giving, because they were so energized by the generosity of the Corinthians. But Paul now says it would be good, then, if the Corinthians do what they said they were going to do.

Verse 3:

> **But I have sent the brethren, in order that our boasting about you may not be made empty in this case, so that, as I was saying, you may be prepared; otherwise, if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we (not to speak of you) will be put to shame by this confidence.** (Vs. 3-4)

Now this is very interesting, what Paul is saying. He is saying the reason he sent Titus and the two brothers with him, which he talked about in Chapter 8, was in order to encourage them to follow through on their gift, because it isn't going to be long until Paul is going to pay a visit to Corinth and it's likely that some of the brothers from the Macedonian churches will be with him. Paul almost always traveled in teams and if they arrive and find out that, *in the midst of their persecution, in the midst of their poverty, they gave generously*, and now they find out that the Corinthians are experiencing *no* persecution—are actually quite well-to-do—but have not contributed a penny, Paul says, "*This is going to be an ugly scene*." As a matter of fact Paul says, "**This will put us to shame**." Paul will be put to shame because he bragged on the Corinthians and they haven't followed through and the Corinthians will be embarrassed because they have failed to contribute what they said they would contribute. Now there's a lot of debate about whether or not

this is a good motive and why is Paul doing this, but the fact of the matter is, it's just very practical. The Corinthians made a promise. Paul believed the promise; he was encouraged by it; he shared it with the Macedonians. They've been very generous but now the Corinthians have been unwilling to follow through and Paul is stuck in the middle. And he's just very practically saying, *"Hey folks, for your sake and mine, let's do what we said we were going to do or this is going to get embarrassing for all of us."* And that's what he is saying there.

Verse 5:

> **So I thought it necessary to urge the brethren that they would go on ahead to you and arrange beforehand your previously promised bountiful gift, so that the same would be ready as a bountiful gift, and not affected by covetousness.**

In other words he's saying, *"Let's follow through on this very generous idea and let's do it willingly."* The idea of covetousness is, "*Let's not do it grudgingly; it was your idea; let's joyfully follow through on it."* Now one of the themes we've seen in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians is that Paul continually reminds the Corinthians that he boasts about them, that he is constantly telling others what a wonderful church they are. I find that to be an interesting concept. As a matter of fact I realized that years and years ago—that that's a very important part of pastoral leadership. I would say to you today, "I am a very boastful pastor." You say, "Bryan, what do you boast about?" I boast about you. I boast about our staff. We have the most wonderful staff—they're the most wonderful group of people. But I boast about *you*! This is the most remarkable place.

I have never taken it for granted that God has allowed me the privilege of serving in a place like this. This is the most amazing and wonderful gathering of people! And one of the things that we boast about is the generosity—both of time and of finances—of the people that gather here. As a matter of fact one of my pastoral peers—one of my pastor friends—in a gathering sometime back said, "Bryan, when you talk about your congregation, it sounds like a dad bragging on his kids." And I would have to say, "Guilty" and I do that because I genuinely feel that way. But I think, over the years, one of the reasons this has become a very special place is because we don't pull punches. We don't dance around issues. We call one another to a higher standard. We call one another to step outside of the value system of the culture and to live differently and to pour ourselves into things that matter. For those of you that are new in the last month, you may not know this but you are probably seated next to some of the most generous people in the community. And one of the reasons for that is we continually call ourselves to a higher standard. I would be the first one to say, "Last week I was pushing, and pushing hard." I don't apologize for that. Part of my job is to call us to a higher standard and for those of you that are new, you need to understand: *That's who we are*! That's what we're about. We're constantly fighting the value system of the world and calling ourselves to a higher way to live. One of the reasons we do that is because we believe what Paul says in Chapter 9 is true, and what he says is quite remarkable.

Verse 6:

> **Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.**

Now this imagery comes right out of the world of agriculture. This would be my math: One hen—one egg; three hens—three eggs—you can do the math. That's exactly what Paul is saying. Every farmer understands this. A little bit of seed means a little bit of harvest. A lot of seed means a lot

of harvest. Now in this case Paul is choosing his terms carefully. When he says**...he who sows sparingly...**it's different than just a little bit of seed. It carries the idea that I don't have seed to spare. It comes with the idea that there's a little bit of fear; there's a little bit of hoarding…"I only have enough for me so I can't afford to spare any." Now this is hard for us to understand with all of the grocery stores and food and everything that we have. But take it back to the days of the pioneers in homesteads, where they understood that in the spring and the summer and the fall they would have to prepare to survive for winter. So if they had a bag of seed, the temptation would be: "*We need to keep this to get through winter. We don't have seed to spare*." Yet they also understood: "*If we don't sow this seed, then there will be no return and we'll probably starve to death halfway through the winter*." So every spring—and this is still true today—every farmer takes a step of faith and they sow the seed and it costs them a lot of money, with the belief that eventually it's going to bring a return—a harvest. And you have to have faith, when you sow the seed that it's going to return in a harvest. So—sow a little; you get back a little; sow a lot and you get back a lot. That's just kind of a basic principle.

There's also a reminder in the language...that when you give to God, you're not giving it *away*. This is one of the most important concepts that we have to understand. When a farmer goes out in the spring, they're not throwing their seed *away*. They're sowing it and they expect from that to reap a harvest. God is saying that, *"When you give to Me, you're not throwing it away; you're investing it. You're sowing it and you can expect a harvest."* It is true that what you give to God, you ultimately keep. What you keep, you ultimately lose and that's hard for us sometimes to understand.

Now I will grant you that the prosperity preachers have grossly abused this concept. If you listen to them—and I do not recommend that you do—there's a lot of sowing and reaping, sowing and harvesting language. But I would also say, because of that abuse, conservative churches like ours often react to that and swing so far the other way that we're unwilling to accept what the text clearly says. This isn't complicated**...he who sows sparingly should expect to reap sparingly, but he** or sh**e who sows bountifully should expect to reap bountifully.** So what is the difference between what Paul is saying and the prosperity preachers? Let's let the text itself answer that question.

Verse 7:

> **Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.**

Each one...meaning this is individual choice...**as he has purposed in his or her heart...**which means this is something we think about; it's something we pray about; it's something that we've **purposed.** We're not led astray by some manipulation or some emotional moment, so it's carefully and prayerfully done. It's not done **...grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.** That shouldn't be hard for us to understand. If somebody gives me a Christmas present and I find out later that they didn't want to; it was forced upon them; they did it grudgingly. That present loses all its meaning. I don't want that. If you don't want to give it to me, then I don't want it. Why would it be any different with God? One of the enjoyable parts of Christmas for a parent is watching his or her children at Christmas. One of the things I've enjoyed the most is to see the transition in my children. In the early years Christmas was all about *"What do I get?"* and that's as it should be as a child. That's the excitement of it all. But over the years there has been a wonderful transition, where now, when I look in my girls' eyes and I see them light up, it's not around *"What do I get?"* It's about *"What do I give?"* They're most excited when their sisters or

Mom or Dad are opening something that has been a gift *from them* and they have understood, "*It's most joyful to give".* So **God loves a cheerful giver**.

Verse 8 is a remarkable verse! As a matter of fact I would tell you that if I read Verse 8 in any other piece of literature other than the Bible, I would say, "No way—grossly overstated." But it isn't in another piece of literature; it is in the Bible and look at what it says:

> **And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed;**

Now notice the words that are used there: **God is able**. *Able* is the Greek word from which we get our word *dynamite, power*—explosive power. God has plenty of power. **God is able to make all grace abound**—all grace overflow. He's got more grace than He needs to pour out on you. He's got the power and the grace, so that what? **So that always having all sufficiency in everything**—that is as comprehensive as it possibly could be. The word **sufficiency** there is a carefully chosen word. In the first century the stoics really claimed this word. It carried with it the idea of *self*-sufficiency. That was a big deal for the stoics; they were *self*-sufficient. Throughout the New Testament Paul takes that word and redefines it—that we are *sufficient in Christ*. It's Christ's sufficiency, but it carries the same fullness that the stoics meant, in terms that we have everything that we need. But it's not found in ourselves; it's found in Christ! So listen again to what he says **...always having all sufficiency in everything.** That's the bountiful harvest God has promised. "*I will take care of you no matter what it is, no matter what the need, no matter what the world throws at you. I just want you to know, if you trust Me, I'll be there and I've got plenty of grace and plenty of power— **always in everything***.

In other words, what the text is saying is that if you sow sparingly, you do that because you don't trust God. And so what you've said to God is, "God, You can't be trusted, so I'm going to trust myself. Therefore, no matter what the world throws at me, I'm going to handle it myself." But if you trust God, then you sow bountifully, understanding that God has promised that**...always having all sufficiency in everything.** Jesus said almost the exact thing in Matthew, Chapter 6. He talks about *where your treasure is, that's where your heart is*. He talks about *laying up for yourselves treasures in Heaven* but, if you keep reading in that text, He gets into the promise that if you trust God, *He will take care of your every need*. He will take care of food; He will take care of clothing. There is no reason to be anxious; there is no reason to worry, because God will take care of you. And then it ends that section with, "*Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you.*" It's the same thing that Paul is saying here. The question is, "Do we believe that?" It's the question that I would pose to you this morning, "Do you think God tells the truth and tells the truth on both sides of the equation?" Do you think God is telling the truth when He says**...If you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly"**? And is He telling the truth when He says**...If you sow bountifully, you will reap bountifully...always having all sufficiency in everything"**?

Now we have a tendency when things get difficult, when the economy starts to get shaky, when things start falling apart, to pull back. We're driven by our fears. But you need to understand that what you're saying in that moment is, "God, things are getting a little bit rough out there, so I think I better trust myself, because I don't think You can be trusted." And let me ask you a question: In an economy like this, with all of the things out there right now that are very questionable, are you sure that's the decision you want to be making? Those who really trust God demonstrate that in their generosity. And they lay their heads on their pillows at night in peace because they believe

God has promised ...**always having all sufficiency in everything.** There is nothing the world could throw at me tomorrow that is outside of what God has promised—"*I will be there for you".*

Now there are always those people that think they can beat the system. For example, they're not generous. As a matter of fact they tend to be selfish; they tend to be hoarders. They like to stockpile and they would say, "Hey I haven't sown generously and I have a big harvest in the bank. You know, what do you think of that, preacher?" Well let's think about that for a minute. What are you saying? Are you saying because you have a lot of money in the bank, you're ready for whatever the world throws at you? That's one of the greatest delusions we as Americans have—that if I have lots of money I can face whatever. That's just foolishness. Let me ask you a question: "If you have a lot of money in the bank, how does that help you when your marriage is falling apart? How does that help you when the doctor calls tomorrow and says, 'Yes, it is cancer'? How does that help you when you get that phone call that your child has been in an accident?" **...always having all sufficiency in everything.** Frankly, in the culture in which we live, a bank account full of money does very little to affect the things that really matter. I don't know about you, but I choose to believe God tells the truth and I want to know that I am trusting Him to face whatever comes my way.

The last part of verse 8**...all sufficiency in everything, that you may have an abundance...** to buy more stuff. Oh, wait a minute, that's not what it says...

> **…in order that you might have an abundance in every good deed.**

This is where we part ways with the prosperity preachers. The prosperity preachers teach, *"You give to get"* — in order that you can buy bigger houses, have nicer cars, and wear nicer jewelry. It's just selfishness. It's just the materialism of the world—Christianized. That's not what Paul is saying here. The reason God brings you a bountiful harvest is so that, out of that bounty, you can sow generously…in order that you can reap a generous harvest…in order that you can sow generously. God gives you more so you can give more away. God loves to give to those that love to give. I don't know how you could possibly read this text and justify stockpiling more and more and more. Are you really thinking that's why God gave it to you? He gave it to you so you could give...so He could give you more...so you could give! The text is pretty clear.

In verse 9 he quotes Psalm 112, Verse 9:

> **…as it is written, "HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER."**

In the Hebrew world it was understood that it was right for a farmer to go out and basically over-scatter his field and everything that was beyond the boundary, in essence, was left for the poor. So the farmer would go out and harvest his field but there was always left, around the perimeter, that which was accessible to the poor, so that they too might have what they need. So this Hebrew word from Psalm 112 that is used for **...scattered...**basically carries that idea that the farmer overplants, over-scatters, in order to provide for the poor. In turn God brings a bigger crop in order that he might over-scatter, that God might bring in a bigger crop, in order that he might over-scatter. And he says, then, that your **...righteousness endures forever**. In other words you are investing in that which lasts **forever.** God rewards you and it's a reward that lasts forever.

Verse 10:

Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food, will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness;

In other words he's saying it's exactly the same now as it was then—that this same God who provides, provides you seed so that you might sow more for a bigger harvest...that you might sow more...so that you will have this eternal reward that God promises.

Verse 11:

…you will be enriched in everything for all liberality *(or all generosity)***, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God. Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality** *(or the generosity)* **of your contribution to them and to all, while they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you.**
(Vs. 11-14)

Paul says ultimately this results in thanksgiving, ultimately results in God getting the glory, ultimately results in the saints having their needs met. And the result of that is they will know—in this case the Jewish believers will know—that the Corinthians really do believe the gospel, because it has been demonstrated. Their **confession of the gospel** has been demonstrated by their **generosity**, by their choice to believe that God tells the truth, to invest themselves in what ultimately, eternally, matters.

One of the biggest problems in the first century church was trying to get the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers together. There were a lot of barriers they had to work through. What Paul is saying is when these Jewish believers, who were suffering, experienced this generosity, God will receive the glory but they will also understand that these Gentile believers really do believe, demonstrated by their **obedience to their confession to the gospel**. In other words they will demonstrate through their generosity that they really do believe, which will pull them together, so much so that these Jewish believers will pray for them and yearn for them and long to come together with them and to celebrate this common faith that they share. One of the greatest ways that we witness to a materialistic culture is through our generosity. It is so grossly out-of-step with the culture in which we live, that it is a powerful witness that we really do believe. "*We really do believe that He who was rich, for your sake became poor, in order that through His poverty you might become rich."* I raised the question last week, "How does that message possibly make us selfish?" I don't understand that. How could that message not make us generous people? For the culture in which we live, they want to know, "Do you really believe that?" and, if there is not evidence in the most ordinary, practical areas of our life, then they have a right to question whether we really believe what we say we believe.

Can you imagine how we could turn this community upside-down for good if every person that calls Lincoln Berean home just simply gave ten percent?...well over ten million dollars a year! We could affect every single social concern that is present in our community today. We could turn this community upside-down for good, to the extent that people would say, "I don't know exactly what those Bereans believe, but I know that they're generous people and this community is better because they're here." What a powerful witness—that we really do believe what we say we believe!

Paul ends the two chapters with verse 15:

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

"He who was rich, for your sake He became poor, in order that through His poverty you might become rich." It's the message of Christmas! It's everything we're about as Christians! It's an **indescribable gift**! We give because God gave, and we give because we trust Him **...always having all sufficiency in everything**. So let me wrap up with a very simple question: "Do you believe that God tells the truth?" Do you believe Him when He says, "**He who sows bountifully will reap bountifully,"** that He has enough grace and power **...always having all sufficiency in everything?** Isn't that what we want? Isn't that what everybody's looking for? —to go to bed at night and know that no matter what happens, God has promised, "I'll take care of you". If I, as your pastor, genuinely believe Chapter 9 is true, then I will do everything in my power to persuade you to believe. To do less would be both unloving and reckless. Whether or not you choose to give is up to you, but I want to make sure we're clear on this. Listen to me. **He who sows sparingly should expect to reap sparingly.** In an uncertain world, are you sure that's the arrangement you want with God?

Our Father, we're thankful that You are a generous God. This time of year we celebrate: You gave Your Son. He who was rich became poor, that through His poverty we might become rich. Lord, if we believe that message, then we should be a generous people. Lord, You've been very clear: he who sows sparingly should expect to reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully should expect to reap bountifully. Lord, in this auditorium this morning, there are many, many very generous people. They believe this with all their heart and they live this every day. But, Lord, I also know there are those here this morning that still are struggling with their own fears and their own selfishness, breaking away from the value system of this world. Lord, I pray that they would be sensitive to Your voice this morning, that they would experience Your sufficiency in whatever life throws their way. Lord, this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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December 5/6, 2009

Sowing and Reaping

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards
2 Corinthians 9:1-15
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What are some reasons (excuses) people might use for being selfish with their resources?

2. Why is giving generously such a struggle for most people?

3. What has been your own journey related to giving and generosity?

Bible Study

1. Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-5. What is Paul's concern? In what ways might we be like the Corinthians in this matter?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-15. What is the principle of sowing and reaping? Compare Luke 6:38 and Galatians 6:7.

3. Carefully study 2 Corinthians 9:8, 11. What does God promise the generous? How extensive is His promise?

4. Why does God give back to the generous? How does this differ from the "Prosperity Gospel?"

5. What are all the benefits of generosity according to this text?

Application

1. Summarize in your own words what Paul is saying in 2 Corinthians 9. Do you believe this is true?

2. Is it possible to believe 2 Corinthians 8,9 and not be generous? Why or why not?

3. What three specific things have your learned or been reminded of from this text? Are there any practical steps you need to take to live more consistently with what you say you believe?

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