

January 7/8, 2012

From Good Intentions to Action

2 Corinthians 8, 9

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Well you probably figured it out—we're talking about money this morning. Probably a good place to start would be an update on the year's end. We had set a goal of 2.2 million and about ten days out we weren't quite sure how this was all going to turn out. But we ended up just shy of 2.1 million, so we're actually very happy with that. I think that's probably the farthest we've been behind since we've moved into this auditorium—so it was a bit of a concern. That's still about \$120,000 short of where we need to be and so, over the next couple of months, we're going to be very cautious and trust that the giving will remain strong. We'll get everything squared up and then move forward from there. But we're real happy with the year's end and just need to get back on track and move forward from there.

Probably most of you have heard kind of the tired-old line from people that have a bit of an axe to grind with churches, where they will say, "I don't go to church because all churches ever talk about is money." Well that statement has no real credibility here. We talk about it twice in January, once in August and we don't apologize for that. If you were to say, "What really bugs me about those Bereans is they're constantly trying to convince us to turn away from the greed and the selfishness and the materialism of our culture and trying to talk us into investing ourselves in the things that ultimately matter," guilty...guilty as charged! If that message offends you, this is going to be a rough ride. We determined very deliberately several years ago, we're going to do everything in our power to try to prevent people from wasting their lives and to do everything to convince them to invest themselves in the things that ultimately matter. But you know, I think that is what most Christians want. I mean what Christian gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'll waste my life today.?" And yet there does seem to be, oftentimes, this gap between good intentions and follow through. We desire to be generous but somewhere along the way we just don't get to the point where we pull the trigger. Martin Luther used to say that the average Christians goes through three conversions: a conversion of the head, a conversion of the heart, and a conversion of the pocketbook. My experience would be that's very accurate. Somewhere along the way we finally experience a conversion of the pocketbook and we get a sense of what it means to be a generous people.

But this is not a new problem—this idea of having good intentions—but somewhere getting stuck before we pull the trigger—that's not a new problem. The Corinthians struggled with it two thousand years ago and Paul gave them a principle that he hoped would motivate them to move from good intentions to actually learning to be a generous people. And that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 8.

A little bit of the background: During this time period, the ten years previous, there had been a serious drought down in Judea, especially the area of Jerusalem, and so there was a famine in the land and this was a very difficult time. It was a very difficult time for everyone down in Judea but it was especially difficult for the Christians because they were already persecuted for their faith—for being a Christ-follower. So the Corinthians came up with a very generous idea. What if we here in Macedonia—we churches together—took up a collection and we sent a gift down to Jerusalem in order to help our brothers and sisters that are really struggling right now just to

survive. The churches in Macedonia thought that was a wonderful idea and that's where we pick it up in verse 1:

Now, brethren, we *wish* to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and *this*, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

Now in verse 2 he's reminding us that the churches in Macedonia weren't doing this because life was easy. They weren't doing this because they were affluent, because they had more than they needed—just the opposite. He says in verse 2...**that in a great deal of affliction.** If you read through the book of Acts, you get a sense of what life was like to be a Christian in the Macedonian churches. It was very, very hard! They were severely persecuted. In the midst of this affliction he said they had *an abundance of poverty, but an abundance of joy.* We don't tend to think of those two concepts going together, but their lives had been so radically changed by the power of Jesus that they had this inner joy; but they also were in the midst of deep poverty. Life for them was really hard. They, too, were in survival mode. He actually goes so far as to say that they gave not only **according to their ability**, in verse 3, but **beyond their ability.** In other words Paul is saying, "...beyond what I even thought was reasonable! They gave according to their ability and beyond." As a matter of fact he pushes it to the point to say they actually **begged us**, they **urged us** for the possibility to participate in the offering going to the church in Jerusalem.

Now in all my years as a pastor, I've never once experienced that, where the people actually begged, pleaded, "Please take an offering! I'm so excited to give; please take an offering! I want to give more." These people in their affliction, these people in their poverty, these people in their pain, were so filled with the joy of Jesus that they longed for the opportunity to be generous to their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. It's really quite remarkable. Paul says the reason is because they gave themselves first to the Lord, and he captures that best in verse 9. He says:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.

That is the essence of the gospel, which does raise an interesting question to think about. When we went through First and Second Corinthians, one of the problems we talked about over and over and over again was this idea of spiritual arrogance. And we raised the question, "How can you possibly really understand the message of grace and have that create within you a spirit of spiritual arrogance?" And our conclusion was: it simply is not possible. The only explanation for an arrogant Christian would be someone who simply doesn't get it, because the message of grace should leave us broken and humble. I would say the exact same thing is true as it relates to generosity. If the very essence of the message of the gospel is *that He who was rich for your sake became poor in order that you, through His poverty, might become rich*, how is it possible that that message makes us selfish, makes us materialistic? The conclusion would be: there's no possible way. The only conclusion we could come to is: if we're selfish and greedy with what God has given us, we simply don't get it! We cannot understand the core of the gospel without it producing generosity in us, and that's exactly what Paul is saying—that even in their affliction, even in their

pain, even in their poverty, the reality of the message of the gospel made them generous people. It would have to.

The churches of Macedonia responded in amazingly generous ways, all except one, and this is the problem. It's now a year later and there's one church that has yet to give a penny—and that is the church of Corinth. It was their idea! They were the ones who said, “This would be a great thing to do—let's take an offering and let's send it to our brothers and sisters in Jerusalem who are in pain.” All the churches in Macedonia thought this is a great idea and they jumped on it with great generosity, except one. And in chapter 9 Paul says, “This is going to get really awkward because all the churches, in their affliction and in their poverty, have given generously except one—and it was *your* idea. Somewhere between having good intentions and the follow-through, you got stuck.” And Paul's urging is, “You need to follow through on what you had committed to on this concept of generosity.”

It has been my experience that that is a very common thing. Christians desire to be generous—they have good intentions. But then they go home; they look through their budget; they do the math and, at the end of it, they conclude: it's just not going to work. That one more step of finally pulling the trigger seems to be where we get stuck. You've probably heard the statement, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” I would adjust it a little bit to say, “The road to materialism is paved with generous thoughts.” We think we should be more generous. There's times when that's our intent but, for whatever reason, we just get stuck and we never really get to the point where we pull the trigger. Now it's easy to go home and look at your budget and come to the conclusion, “I just can't do it—there's no money left.” But that is the point! That is symbolic of a bigger problem. Somewhere along the way you have not managed God into your lifestyle, and your money is simply a barometer of a bigger problem. I can assure you, if God doesn't get your money, there are several areas of your life where God is not getting your life. If you are generous with your money, you can rest assured you're probably generous with many areas of your life toward the Kingdom of God. It's a bit of a barometer.

Seated next to you this morning are some of the most generous people in our community. They carefully, sacrificially, generously give to the Kingdom of God. They invest in the things that matter. But it's very important to understand, these are not people that figure up their budget and there's so much extra; there's so much surplus we don't need; we might as well throw it at God. Every person who consistently gives to God can identify with that emotional turmoil of going from good intentions to actually reorienting my life in such a way that I can be a generous giver. We've all had to go through that. It's not easy. It's very hard—but that is the point. The point is: it's supposed to cost us something; it's supposed to be sacrificial. That's the whole point! David said, “I will not give to God that which costs me nothing.” It is an act of worship. It's sitting down and realizing, “This is going to require me to change my lifestyle. This is going to involve things that we can and cannot do. I'm going to have to change my thinking and drive the same old vehicle for another year. I'm going to have to not go on this vacation. I'm going to have to adjust the things that I'm spending my money on. I'm going to have to actually alter my lifestyle in order to live for the things that ultimately matter.” That is the point! And there are people seated around you this morning that do that every single week. It costs them in order to be a generous people.

This is one of the things I would invite those of you whom God has blessed with *more* to consider: When was the last time you actually had to sit down and say, “If we give this to God, it's going to alter our lifestyle.”? It's easy as God blesses to just start giving out of the abundance but the fact is: it doesn't really change anything in day-in and day-out living. But seated around you are people of

modest means who every year have to sit down and say, “In order to be generous to God, we’re going to have to radically alter our lifestyle.” They’re very courageous people; they’re very faithful people—and that’s the majority of people that give. If God has blessed you with *more*, my challenge to you would be: When was the last time you actually gave to the point where it cost you something? We actually had to decide what we will and won’t do this year and what this is going to cost us *now*—it’s going to change our lifestyle!

What does it actually cost you to give to God? The problem of getting stuck between good intentions and pulling the trigger is a common problem, so Paul shares with the Corinthian believers a principle that he believes will motivate them to take that next step and to follow through on their intentions. I want to pick it up in chapter 9, then, in verse 6:

Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver. 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; as it is written,

**“HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR,
HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER.”**

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; you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God. (Vs. 6-11)

Now the principle is stated in verse 6 and it’s not complicated. It’s about sowing and reaping. Now it’s interesting because the prosperity preachers, because many of the television preachers have so abused this principle. It’s like many of us in the fundamentalist movement, or the evangelical movement. We have swung the pendulum so far to the other side that we’re unwilling to acknowledge what the text actually says. I’m interested in how many preachers try to explain this away, as if it doesn’t say what it says. This isn’t complicated.

Certainly of all people, we in Nebraska should understand the concept of sowing and reaping. I mean really, we’ve got a Sower on top of the capitol building! Aren’t we declaring ourselves to be experts in this field? As a matter of fact I’d like to plant a seed—pun intended—that every time you look at the Sower on top of the capitol building, it would remind you of this principle and cause you to ask the question, “How am I sowing?” because, “*if I sow sparingly, I should expect to reap sparingly. If I sow bountifully, I should expect to reap bountifully.*” Now one of the things that this text reminds us is that, when you give to God, you’re not giving your money away. This is a really important thing to understand. When I buy stuff, I’m throwing it away. But when I sow into God’s Kingdom, I’m sowing seed and I expect a harvest; I expect to reap back. It’s the only spending of my money I do where I’m not throwing it away.

We live about twenty miles south. On all four sides of us are farmers. This spring hundreds of thousands of dollars of seed will be sown by these farmers. I’m going to guarantee you that not one single farmer, at the end of the day of sowing seed, will come back home, sit at the kitchen table and, with his head in his hands, weep because he just threw away all his seed. The farmer understands you have to sow the seed in order to reap a harvest. This isn’t complicated. *If you sow sparingly, you reap sparingly. If you sow bountifully, you reap bountifully.* It’s simple farming.

So Paul is encouraging them to think about sowing. Now this isn't talking just about money but it certainly *is* talking about money—that's the whole point of chapters 8 and 9. In verse 7 he reminds us that the motive should be as we've **...purposed in our hearts, not grudgingly or under compulsion. God loves a cheerful giver.** Now this is something that we try to be very careful of here. Even simple things—for example—on the weeks when we're talking about money, we're very careful to make sure the offering is before the sermon. We're not trying to work you up into an emotional lather and then take an offering. We want you to be thoughtful; we want you to be prayerful. We want you to decide, "This is what God wants me to do." But every organization does not operate that way. A friend of mine was sharing in December that some of the organizations are just so relentless that sometimes you give just to get them off your back. I would say, "Please don't do that." Please don't reward unbiblical methodology. That's not good stewardship. An organization that operates that way isn't worthy of your dollar. It should be thoughtful; it should be prayerful. It should be cheerfully given—that this is what God wants me to do with what He's given to me.

I'm going to come back to verse 8 in a minute. In verses 9, 10, and 11 the principle is that God gives in order that we might give it away. The more He gives, the more we have to give away. That's what he's talking about in those verses there. This is what distinguishes the correct principle from the abuse of this principle with the prosperity doctrine. The prosperity message would be that you *give to get*. In other words there's still a selfish, greedy consumer heart. This is a way to manipulate God; this is a way to work the system in order that I might get more, in order that I might have more. That's not what he's talking about. What he is talking about is that *we get, in order to give*, that there's a heart of generosity that says the more God blesses me, the more I have to give away.

Over the years I've become absolutely convinced that God is a very generous God who longs to pour out His generosity on His people. The only thing that limits God's generosity is us! When God is generous to us, it messes us up. It changes our value system; it gets us off course. We start thinking about things other than the kingdom—and so God has to limit what He can give us because we can't handle it. But if we really had the generous heart that understood, "God, the more You give me, the more I can give away." That's the principle of a generous heart. That's the sowing and reaping. Verse 8 is the verse I'd really like to drill down on, though:

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything...

Let me tell you, that is a mouthful. As a matter of fact let's pretend that we didn't just read that. Let's pretend that I'm just up here chatting with you and I'm trying to convince you that it's worth it to go from good intentions to doing what's necessary—to pull the trigger to become a generous person. And you ask me, "Why should I do that?" and I was to say something like, "Because God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything". If I was to say that, you would say, "Over the top...over the top! That's too much—that's exaggerated speech. You're overstating that just to motivate us to give." I would agree with you. But I didn't say it. Verse 8 is *over the top!* It's unimaginable that God's grace is such that **...always having all sufficiency in everything, in order that we might have abundance so I can give some more.** That is an amazing statement! In a world that is becoming so unpredictable, that is becoming so unstable—now they're running these commercials on TV where apparently in the next couple of months the whole world is going to collapse...and it's a good way to sell products—I guarantee you, that fear motivation is only going to increase as the world gets more unstable and we feel like everything's

coming unhinged. This world is full of unpredictable things. It's full of disease; it's full of war; it's full of terrorists and the economy—there are plenty of things to worry about. But what if it was possible that, in the midst of all that, you could have a promise that says **...always having all sufficiency in everything**. In other words God is saying, “No matter what happens, no matter what happens in this world, I will take care of you; I will be there; I will be your sufficiency; I will be all you need.” What if that was possible? Wouldn't that be priceless?

If you were here on Christmas Eve, you heard the testimony of Don who, as a physician, was in the ICU watching his son die. There simply was nothing he could do about it and it was at that moment that he surrendered his life to Jesus because he realized really, at the end of the day, I'm not sufficient for much of anything. We kid ourselves when we think that we can be our own sufficiency. There's very little in this world I can control and, when the bottom drops out of the world, I simply am not qualified to give myself what I need. But what if there's another option? What if, in the midst of all the uncertainty of life, there really was a promise that said...**always having all sufficiency in everything**...no matter what, you're going to be okay; I'm going to take care of you?

You can't claim verse 8 and pretend that verse 6 doesn't precede it. What else could Paul possibly be talking about if he doesn't mean *when you sow sparingly, you reap sparingly*—that you don't experience the fullness of verse 8? That's the whole point of the text! When you trust God with what you have, you're saying, “God, I want to trust You. You're my sufficiency. You're in charge; I surrender to You; I want to live for Your values and I'll trust You, that no matter what happens in this life, You'll be the One who takes care of me. I don't want to be my own provider; I don't want to be my own protector; I don't want to be my own sufficiency. I'm not qualified for the task.” If that's my choice, I have reason every day to be filled with fear and anxiety but, *if I sow bountifully I can expect to reap bountifully*, and I believe God will take care of me no matter what happens in this world.

If tomorrow you experience the greatest tragedy of your life, how does that stuff you bought help you in that moment? How does it bring you comfort? How does it bring you peace? If tomorrow the doctor says, “Cancer,” how does that stuff meet you in your hour of need? But what if there was One who promised to *always, having all sufficiency in everything*...I'll take care of you? In my mind that's absolutely priceless.

Now I understand the process. We've all been there. We hear the message; we get the principle; we go home and we start looking through the budget. We do the math, but things get pretty tight. We start to kind of get this funny feeling in the pit of our stomach; the pulse rate starts to increase a little bit; it starts to become more and more obvious—this isn't going to work! We just don't have it—and we walk away. That is the point. Your current lifestyle has simply not factored God in. It may be necessary to make radical changes in your lifestyle to reorient yourself around the things that ultimately matter. Do you realize that if you make \$25,000 a year, you're in the top 10% of the wealthiest people on the *Planet Earth*? Do you really think you're going to be able to stand before God and say, “Hey, I ran the numbers—it just wouldn't work.”? We need to understand that we may need to make some really hard decisions. Maybe I bought a house I can't really afford. Maybe I'm buying vehicles I can't really afford. Maybe I'm swiping too many credit cards. Maybe my spending is out of control. Something has to change to get me back to a level where I can live a life of generosity towards the things that ultimately matter. You can't just go home and look at the budget and say, “I don't have it,” and walk away.

Years ago, Patty and I had been married for just a year. About two weeks earlier my Dad had died. We threw everything into a little Subaru that we could fit—a little 2-door Subaru—and we headed for the West Coast for me to go to seminary. We had just enough money to get there and get an apartment. We both got jobs; I started school and we settled in. Things were really, really tight so I came up with a brilliant plan. I thought, “You know, I am going to seminary and that’s training to do God’s work. So it only makes sense if we counted the money that we’re using to pay the school bill as our giving—because certainly that’s what God would want. You know He doesn’t want a seminary student starving in the streets.” So I shared my plan with Patty. She was rather uncomfortable with it, but we decided to go with it—and we did go with it. We went with it for about three or four months, until it got to the point where we just couldn’t do that. We talked about the fact that this is not good. We’re getting on a bad track. Throughout our marriage there will always be rationalizations; there will always be excuses; there will always be other things that we could consume our resources on that, in our minds, somehow made it okay to do this. We just felt like this is starting off going down the wrong path. So we settled on ten percent. I don’t think the Old Testament tithe is in effect in the New Testament, but virtually all scholars would say the covenant of grace certainly would not expect less. It’s certainly a minimal standard. So we said ten percent of every penny we make automatically goes to God; it goes to the local church that we were plugged into. I remember the emotion of that; I remember the trauma of that; I remember the fear of that. Nobody’s so spiritual that they just say, “Let’s do that,” and it doesn’t bother them. We had no savings account; we had no rich relatives. We were clearly aware that if the transmission on the car drops out, we’re toast. We have absolutely no ability to do anything about it. All we have is to live by faith and trust God. I graduated from seminary—no debt, no credit cards, school bill one hundred percent paid. Now thirty years later I don’t believe there’s been a time in these thirty years where giving has ever dipped below ten percent and, in more recent years, the ability to do more.

Here’s the point of the story: I have thirty years of a track record of experiencing verse 8, of experiencing God’s sufficiency in the struggles, in the trials, in the ups and downs of life. And I would tell you, having experienced verse 8 for thirty years, I would never go back. I would never go back and seek to be self sufficient. Seated around you this morning are some of the most generous people in our community. They understand this; they get this; they live this; they could tell their own story. But I would guess that there’s not a single person in this room that has chosen to be generous to God who would ever say, “I wish I could go back and do it differently.” Having together experienced the reality of verse 8, we would say, “It’s absolutely priceless; I can’t imagine living any other way.

My prayer this morning would be for those of you that have good intentions. You do want to be generous but you get stuck somewhere between the good intentions and the follow-through, that you would understand this principle and say, “You know, this is the way I want to live. We do need to make some changes because I do want to be a generous person. I do want to invest what we have in the things that ultimately matter. I do want to experience the realities of verse 8.” At the core of our belief system is that: *the Lord Jesus Christ who was rich, for your sake became poor, in order that through His poverty you might become rich.* How can that message not make us a generous people?

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us. You pour out blessings upon us. Lord, I do believe the blessings are limited only by the effect it has on us. God, You want so much for us to be generous, that You might be more generous, that we might invest what we have in the things that matter. Lord, this room is filled with people that every year sacrifice in a significant way. Their lifestyles are significantly altered in order to live a generous lifestyle. Lord, there's others here this morning, I know they want to be generous but, Lord, they get stuck somewhere between the thought and the reality. Lord, I pray that You would remind them of the principle, that You would give them the courage they need to do whatever is necessary to reorient their lives in order to experience the joy of generosity. Lord, this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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