January 18/19, 2025

Sowing and Reaping

Re-Think Stewardship Series

2 Corinthians 8 & 9

Pastor Bryan Clark

As Ryan mentioned last week, we're taking two weeks in January to talk about money. So, if you lean toward the cynical side of life, or you're just a little bit grumpy this morning, you may find yourself thinking, "Why do churches always have to talk about money?" It's like, "No, just two weeks: last weekend and this week." But if you were to think, "What really annoys me about these Berean pastors is they're always trying to get us to live for the things that matter?" "Guilty! *(laughter)* It's something we're actually very passionate about!" It's a sobering thought. You only get one shot at life. We're really committed to trying to get people to think about what really matters. Almost all the biblical texts, ultimately, are about a very objective way to measure your value system, to measure your priorities, to measure what really matters to you. Martin Luther, the great reformer, once wrote, "Every Christian goes through three conversions: a conversion of the head, a conversion of the heart, and a conversion of the purse." I do think that's true, and I think most of us can relate to that. It was a problem in the 1500s when he wrote that, and it is certainly a problem for us today. It was a problem for the early church in the first century. So, that's what we want to talk about.

If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 8. I'm just going to pick a few verses from chapters 8 and 9 but let me give you a little background on what was going on. There had been about a 10-year drought down in Judea, in the area of Jerusalem. As a result of that, there was a significant famine. Jewish Christians were being persecuted. So, on top of the famine, life had become very difficult for them. It was difficult to just survive. So the Corinthian church, in the city of Corinth, was a very wealthy city, and they came up with the idea that, "Why don't we take an offering, and we'll take it to our brothers and sisters in Jerusalem to help them survive?" So Paul says, "That's a great idea. Let's do that." So word leaked out to the churches of Macedonia. These would be churches like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, (our namesake). So, over time, all of those different churches in Macedonia contributed generously to the fund. The only church that hadn't contributed a penny was the Corinthian church. It was their idea. Now about six months have passed, but they have yet to follow through. You've heard this saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." You could adjust the saying to say, "The road to materialism is paved with good intentions." Can you imagine one day standing before God and saying, "You know, I really planned to be generous. It just never actually happened." So that's the background for chapters 8 and 9. Chapter 8, verse 1:

> **Now, brethren, we *wish to* make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia,** (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 8:1)

So, it's really important, as we start this conversation, to understand that giving and generosity is an outflow of everything that defines us as Christians, the whole basis by which we believe we've been forgiven of our sins. We believe that God has offered us new life, the very basis by which there is a hope and a future, the very basis by which we believe there will be heaven when we die.

All that comes down to the overwhelming generosity of God and His amazing grace. Everything that defines us as Christians comes down to the reminder that God is an incredibly generous God. As a matter of fact, in verse 9, Paul states it this way:

> **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.**

Now here's my question, "How is it possible that we could actually believe that's true—that He who was rich became poor for you—so that through His poverty, you might become rich?" How could we actually believe that, and it not make us generous people? How much of a disconnect do we actually have to have to say we really believe that's true, but for some reason, it hasn't produced a generosity in our own hearts? That just makes no sense. So, that's where the conversation starts. It's possible to say, "You know, I get that; I get that, but we just can't afford it." What you're implying is that the churches of Macedonia could afford it. So let's see what Paul says about that. Verse 2:

> **…that in a great deal of affliction . . .**

Literally the Greek there is the *fires of persecution.* So, if you remember from our study of the book of Acts, these churches in Macedonia were going through a great deal of persecution. If you remember when Paul and Silas came to Philippi, it stirred up all kinds of problems. They ended up being beaten; they were thrown in jail. It's the whole story of the Philippian jailer, which gives you just a glimpse of the level of persecution these Christians were experiencing. Paul goes to Thessalonica, and it creates such a mob scene that they have to flee Thessalonica, just to spare their lives. They go up to Berea, which is our namesake, and part of that mob follows them all the way to Berea and drives them out of Berea. It gives you just a glimpse of the level of persecution these Christians were experiencing. So he says that **in a great deal of affliction…** (the fires of persecution)…

> **…their abundance of joy and their deep poverty** (*significant poverty*) **overflowed in the wealth of their liberality** (*the wealth of their generosity*)**. 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,** (Vs. 2b-4)

So he says, "These are persecuted Christians, living in deep poverty, and yet with joyful hearts, showed great generosity in their response to this request." As a matter of fact, he says they gave **according to their ability**. According to means *in proportion to*. The issue is never how much you give; it's how much you give according to how much you have. You can't give what you don't have. So they didn't have much. They were being persecuted. They were extremely poor. Can you imagine, as 21st century Americans, one day looking them in the eye and saying to them, "Hey, the reason we couldn't give is because we couldn't afford it," when persecuted Christians living in deep poverty joyfully contributed with great generosity, **according to their ability**? But then Paul says the strangest thing, **and beyond their ability**. Paul said they actually went beyond what was reasonable, probably what they should have. The text says they were actually begging, pleading for the opportunity to give more to the offering. If you read between the lines, you get

the sense that they actually were going so far in their generosity that Paul or someone else was saying, "Hey, this is too much. This is beyond. You're going to give away what you need. You shouldn't do that." And so they're begging and pleading with the opportunity. "Please, let us do this and contribute more." So I've been doing this for a long time, and I can't recall ever a time when the people were pleading with me, "Please, Pastor Clark, please take more offerings. *(laughter)* We've got more money we want to give." But that is what was happening. Verse 5:

> **…and *this*, not as we had expected,** (*I think in today's language, it'd be something like, we were blown away.*)**, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.**

That last line is very important to understand, because what he's saying is that it started with their giving of their hearts to Jesus, and the mission to preach Jesus to others. Even before they became Christians, life was hard for these people. It was hand to mouth. It was a very difficult existence. It was a time of great despair. And then along comes Paul to preach the gospel, and suddenly they hear this message of the amazing grace of God—that through God's generous gift they could have their sins forgiven. They could have new life. They could have a future. Their future would be glorious! And in the midst of all of that, their lives have been radically changed. They first gave their hearts to Jesus. They're like, "This is what we've always been looking for." It's very similar to Luke chapter 12—the passage that Ryan taught last week—when Jesus said, "***Where your treasure is, that's where your heart is."*** They first gave their heart to Jesus, which was then evident—made evident—by the generosity of their giving. Verse 7:

> **But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness** (*which is a sincere commitment*) **and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.**

So verse 7 is a very interesting verse, because essentially, Paul is saying, "If you were to describe someone who is really committed to following Jesus, what would you expect to find?" "Well, I'd expect to find **faith**. I'd expect to find **knowledge**, truth. I'd expect to find a genuine commitment. I'd expect to find **love**." He says, "Let's add to that list, generosity." ***He who was rich for your sake, He became poor in order that through His poverty, you might become rich.*** If that's true, we should expect to find faith, love, knowledge, commitment, and certainly, generosity. How could we really believe that without it making us generous people? In our vision statement, we say: *We come together, to know Jesus, to become like Him.* To become like Him is to be generous. That's the whole core of what we believe as the people of God. The rest of the chapter is an ongoing conversation with the Corinthian church that, "Hey, this was your idea. It's a great idea, but you're stuck!" There's been a conversion of the head, a conversion of the heart, but now they're stuck trying to get to the conversion of their wallet or their purse. It goes all the way through the chapter.

Then in chapter 9, verses 1 through 5, the conversation gets more intense. Paul goes so far as to say, "You know, this is going to be really embarrassing." As a matter of fact, he goes farther than that. "This is going to be shameful." These persecuted churches that are living in deep poverty have responded with great generosity. There was no persecution in Corinth. It was a very wealthy city, and the only church that hasn't participated is them, and it was their idea in the first place. So Paul is like, "Hey, you need to follow through on what was a really good idea." You can read that

for yourself, but I want to identify Paul's concern at the end of verse 5, the concern that they would be affected by **covetousness**. The Greek word translated covetousness is the exact same Greek word in the text last week that Ryan preached that was translated ***greed***. Jesus said, "Beware of all greed." Ryan told us the term literally means, *have more*. The more we have, the more we think we need, the more we think we can't live without. And it just becomes more and more. For these persecuted Christians living in deep poverty, they didn't have anything. There was just no thought of more. They couldn't have more. But in a wealthy city, they had a lot. So they wanted more and they needed more.

This is a huge problem for us as 21st century Americans. For all our fussing and complaining, we live better than any other people in the world. We have more than anybody else in the world. But this is the problem. We have, so we want more, and then we need more, and we can't live without more. And this begins to define the trajectory of our lives. This is what we live for. This ultimately then defines the pathway of life. That's why Jesus said, "Hey, beware of this greed," because it's going to take you down the wrong path. So here's what often happens. You hear a message like the message Ryan preached last week, which was excellent. You go home; you look at the budget; you conclude, "You know, that would be great, but we just can't afford it." It's very important to understand we're not saying that you need to look for some extra money that you don't need, and maybe God can have that. That's not what we're talking about. It's supposed to cost us something. When you look at your budget, what you're looking at is a list of your priorities. You're looking at a list of your values. We seem to be able to come up with money for lots of other things. So if God doesn't show up in our priorities, it is what it is. It's not a value to us. It's a way to identify, "What are we really living for? What ultimately matters?" In order to become a generous person, it usually requires a significant lifestyle change. That's the point. To rethink what ultimately matters to us, what is it we're going to live for? Verse 6:

> **Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.** (2 Corinthians 9:6)

This is a principle that's identified several times in the New Testament: **sowing** and **reaping**. Now certainly we, as Nebraskans in a farming state, who live in a city where on top of the Capitol building is a sower, ought to get this. *(laughter)* It's not complicated. You sow a little bit of seed; you can expect a little bit of harvest. You sow a lot of seed, you can expect a lot of harvest. This isn't complicated, but I do want to make a couple comments. One is, it's important to understand sowing is not the same as throwing it away. Sowing is an investment in the upcoming harvest. No farmer goes out in the spring in agony, because he just threw away all this expensive seed. They're pretty clear on this. You've got to sow the seed to invest in the harvest. If I was to be just completely blunt, which is so unusual for me, *(laughter)* and you want to talk about throwing your money away, buy more stuff, because, at the end of the day the stuff is all gone. But to invest in something that ultimately matters forever is to sow and experience a harvest.

Secondly, the word **sparingly** is not a synonym for *little*. They're not sowing a little bit of seed, because they only have a little bit of seed. Sparingly, by definition, implies you have more. You just chose to sow sparingly, meaning you chose to keep this much, just sowing a little. So the harvest will be sparingly. Sow, to reap. So I've been doing this for a long time. I'm pretty sure about this point in the message, some of you are really annoyed at me. Some of you are thinking,

"I wish I hadn't come today. It's really cold outside. I wish I'd have stayed home. When is this going to be over?" Okay, I understand that. But here's what I'd say, "Just take a deep breath. Nobody knows what you give except God. It's between you and God. There's going to be no arm twisting at the end of this. If you don't want to give, then don't give. If you're going to give grudgingly, God doesn't want it. And frankly, neither do we. If you don't want to give it, don't give it." 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.**

But here's my question. "What is it that people understand is true that causes them to be cheerful about giving?" They must understand something that makes them joyful givers. Verse 8:

> **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.**

Every time I read verse 8, I am struck by the language. If I were to say that in a sermon—**always having all sufficiency in everything**—you'd be like, "Oh, that's way over the top, like hyperbole. That's really exaggerated." But I'm not the one saying it. It's in the Bible: **Always having all sufficiency in everything**.

It reminds me a lot of the text from last week, when Jesus is talking to the people about *seeking first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you.* Here: **Always having all sufficiency in everything**. So what does He say? "**Look at the birds. Look at the flowers. You don't need to worry. You don't need to be fearful.**" **All sufficiency in everything.** Don't you think in a world that feels like it's coming unhinged, and everything feels so unstable and so unpredictable, wouldn't you want to know you would always have all sufficiency in everything? "I don't have to be fearful; I don't have to worry. He's going to take care of me." You say, "Now, wait a minute. That's true of all Christians. I mean, that's this whole grace thing. Verse 8 applies to all of us, right?" "No, no," he just said, "If you sow sparingly, you're going to reap sparingly." The reason you choose to sow sparingly reflects a value system. It reflects a belief system.

This is the same conversation we had last week out of Luke chapter 12. If I think life is found in more—in my possessions, in my stuff, and I really appreciate the ticket to heaven, and I'll slip it in my back pocket—but other than that, I really want to live my life on my terms. That's where we're at when we sow sparingly. The result of that is we're going to reap sparingly. We're not going to really experience the life that Jesus offers. We're not going to experience the freedom and the abundance and the life my soul longs for. We're just going to struggle along in our Christian lives, because we're determined still to keep running the show. So you're going to reap sparingly.

So what does he mean when he says "**Sow bountifully, you'll reap bountifully**." First of all, it's not the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel is, "You give to get." You're trying to control God, to manipulate God, to somehow earn God's favor to make you rich. It's just a spiritual form of greediness. That's not what we're talking about. We're not saying that through your money, you manipulate God; through your money, you gain favor with God. You're not buying God off. What the text is saying is that when you give joyfully…you give cheerfully…you give bountifully,

it reflects a value system. It reflects a belief system. It reflects your deep conviction that the life that Jesus offers is the better life. "This is the path I want to follow. This is where life is found." It's exactly what Jesus said, "***Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto you***." There's nowhere the Bible teaches that the grace thing means we can just live as we please, and grace covers it all. If you're going to sow bountifully, then you're surrendered to the life of Jesus, to follow Him, and to live for what matters, and to be part of what is going to cause others to flourish around you. It says in verse 9:

> **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** (*all generosity*)**, which through us is producing thanksgiving to God.** (Vs. 9-11)

He's quoting there from Psalm 112. Psalm 112 is about this idea in the ancient Near East, where farmers had a responsibility to not just sow their field, but to sow beyond the boundary. And what was beyond the boundary was harvested by the poor, so the poor could have food to eat. So, a generous farmer overseeds. As a result of that, God gives them a bigger harvest so they can overseed more. Then God can give them a bigger harvest. So, God keeps giving them more seed because they keep generously giving more to create a context where everybody flourishes together.

I am absolutely convinced that what prevents God from blessing us more is because more would mess us up. The more we have, the more messed up we get, and the more we lose track of what matters, and the more we travel down an unfortunate path. So why would God give us more if more is just going to mess us up? But when we receive and generously give, God is free to give us more, that we might generously give, that we might all flourish together.

If you're serious about following Jesus, if you're serious about living for what ultimately matters, I said it before. I'm constantly sobered by the reality that you only get one shot at life. What a horrible thing to get to the end of your story and realize, "I totally biffed it. I never really understood what matters." That's a life wasted. I can't imagine anybody in the room wants that. So, if you're serious about seeking first the kingdom of God, probably the most accurate barometer for measuring how you're doing, is what you do with your money. That demonstrates your priorities. It demonstrates your values. This is ultimately what matters to us, because **where your treasure is, that's where your heart is**.

> *Our Father, we're thankful that You love us so much, You tell us the truth. You warn us. You give us every chance to live this one life for the things that matter. Lord, may that be so with us in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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WINTER 2025 // WEEK 2

Life Group Questions

ReThink: Stewardship, January 18/19, 2025

Sowing and Reaping // 2 Corinthians 8 & 9

Introduction

This week Pastor Bryan led us through another important passage on Stewardship: 2 Corinthians 8 & 9. We noticed how Jesus is the ultimate example of generous living and that truly understanding His grace makes us generous people too. Whether generosity is a painful or joyful experience for you, we encourage you to honestly approach your group discussion. As always, we hope you respond with grace to one another and keep pointing each other to Jesus and the way of His Kingdom!

We invite you to look over all the questions on the following pages and write your thoughts down before you meet with your group. Some people even use these questions to take notes during the sermon. The questions are meant to stir your thinking and prompt open discussion, and we do not expect you will cover every question each week.

Warm Up *(Suggested time: 30 min)*

1) What was the most thrilling 15 minutes of your past year? Share with the group.

2) On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 = no interest, 10 = total buy-in), what's your interest level in the RETHINK Workshop January 31 – February 1? Check out more information below.



***RETHINK:* Stewardship Workshop**
January 31 // 6:00 pm – 8:00 pm
February 1 // 8:30 am – 2:00 pm
Cost: FREE, Childcare is available for minimal cost
Register at
https://www.lincolnberean.org/eventfinder/eventdetails/?id=35084

We encourage you to consider attending this workshop with others from your Life Group. It will be very practical dive into the things we have discussed these last 2 weeks. A few of the questions that will be considered and discussed:

- Am I viewing myself as a manager or trustee of what God's given me, or seeing myself as owner and controller of my own stuff?
- What am I doing to train my children to be generous givers - and not just donors but disciples?
- Am I hanging onto excess money as a backup plan in case God fails me?
- What am I holding onto that's robbing me of present joy and future reward?

Getting Started

Transition into group discussion.

1) Open group discussion with prayer. Here are a few potential prayer items:
    a. For the Spirit of God to lead you in truth
    b. For the fruit of the Spirit to be cultivated in your lives
    c. For grace to hear and apply what the Spirit says to you
2) Choose someone to read the passage aloud for the group.

Study Questions *(Suggested time: 40 min)*

1) What were your key take-aways from the weekend sermon or worship service?

2) Pastor Bryan mentioned a quote that attributed to Martin Luther, "There are three conversions necessary in the Christian life: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse." **Do you think that idea still holds up in our culture today? Explain your answer with a real-life example.**

Which of these 3 conversions (heart, mind, purse) challenge you the most? What might need to change in order for you to think and act the way Jesus did in that area?

In 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul seems to put generosity on par with faith, knowledge, and love as qualities that exemplify a follower of Jesus. **How does this verse relate to the quote by Martin Luther in what it teaches about our view of money?**

3) Read 2 Corinthians 8:9 out loud in your group: *"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."* **In your own words, explain how this verse speaks of the gospel.**

Pastor Bryan challenged us to consider, "Do you think we can truly believe the words of verse 9 and *not* become generous people?" In a more personal manner, what would others learn about the generosity of Jesus simply by viewing the way you steward your resources?

4) 2 Corinthians 9:6-11 gives us a principle of sowing and reaping. It makes sense that a planted crop provides a harvest of equal proportions. What is the simple reality of sowing and reaping as described in the passage?

To what extent do you approach stewardship with a cheerful heart? Share some reasons for your attitude, if you feel comfortable.

What areas of your life might God be asking you to sow bountifully? How can your Life Group support you in taking practical steps toward doing that?

Personal Spiritual Exercises

Just like physical exercises help strengthen and stretch our bodies for healthy living, these spiritual exercises are meant to move us spiritually in ways that may be new so we might experience inner growth. Since God longs for us to experience Him with our whole selves—mind, body, spirit—we invite you along each week to strengthen your souls with suggestions and prompts.

Scripture Focus: Psalm 128 was a song that reminded God's people of the ways He would make them prosperous. What determines the blessing of God in this psalm and how does it relate to our passage today?

> *Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord,*
> *Who walks in His ways.*
> *2 When you eat the fruit of the labor of your hands,*
> *You will be happy and it will go well for you.*
> *3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine*
> *Within your house,*
> *Your children like olive plants*
> *Around your table.*
> *4 Behold, for so shall a man*
> *Who fears the Lord be blessed.*
>
> *5 The Lord bless you from Zion,*
> *And may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.*
> *6 Indeed, may you see your children's children.*
> *Peace be upon Israel!*

Prayer Focus: 2 Corinthians 9:8 uses strong language to affirm God's commitment to His people. Imagine that Paul himself is speaking this verse over your life. Can you believe that this is true? Offer a prayer of response to God for the extraordinary promise in this verse.

Prayer *(Suggested time: 20 min)*

A significant part of "coming together" is being open and honest with our lives. Sitting in a group of people for prayer may be new or it may be familiar to you. If you would rather not pray aloud when it is your turn, feel free to pray silently and then say "Amen" aloud signaling the next person in the group to pray. Whether or not you choose to verbalize your prayer, everyone is a participant in sharing this time before God together.

Take a few moments to prepare a prayer request. What did the message, working through the above questions or the discussion cause you to notice about your own relationship with Jesus? Would you be willing to share your prayer request with the group?