

The Gift of Generosity

DAVE BAST

Every church or ministry has them: people with the gift of generosity. We sometimes call them good givers. They are the backbone of support, not just for Christian ministry, but for every social institution in a community. So, what does it take to be a good giver? Let's explore that right now, on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and we have been doing a series...a brief, four-part series, on the unsung virtues of the Christian life, of the New Testament, as it teaches us how to be followers of Jesus, how to follow his example. Sometimes we have referred to these as the mundane gifts of the Spirit, the down-to-earth kinds of things. So, we have been enjoying, really, exploring these sort of everyday gifts that everyday Christians need to have.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and our touchstone passage, which I think has come up in all four programs, certainly in the last two, has been Romans 12; and just to remind you of verses 6 through 8 of that, Paul writes:

^{6b}If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach. ⁸If it is to encourage, then give encouragement. If it is giving, then give generously. If it is to lead, do it diligently. If it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. And that last one was program two in this series when we looked at mercy, but it is that line about giving and giving generously that we want to focus on in this program.

We have noted all through this series when we talked about hospitality, mercy, and in the last program, service, and now on generosity, some people sort of have an extra concentration of these things. Some people are just incredibly good hosts, and are wonderful at hospitality, but we are all supposed to have these things; so, we have deacons in the church, a formal office, who serve the poor; but we are all supposed to be mini deacons, we are all supposed to be about service; and so also, some people are just sort of naturally generous with their time or their talent or their treasure, and maybe they are people of means who have more to give away in the first place, but we are all supposed to be generous; so, we want to note that right up front.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't use the concept of these things as gifts of the Spirit to sort of opt out of any of them and say: Well, I don't really have the gift of giving. I like to keep everything that I have to myself; so, if you have that gift, that is great. You do that and I will just be miserly or I will be a Scrooge. It doesn't work that way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

These are all for all of us, even though some people probably are better at it than others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it seems like, Dave, if you think about it, perhaps one of the key marks of our sinfulness is the fact that we don't give generously naturally, it seems. I mean, anybody who has ever been a parent or an uncle or aunt, or a grandparent knows that one of the things you have to say to your children and grandchildren fairly regularly is: Come on, share; share...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You have more M&Ms there than you need, give some to Jill. We have to tell children to share because, already from a very early age, their natural inclination is to say: Mine, mine; and pull it in close. So, there seems to be a sinful aspect to our fallen characters that affects us on exactly this front, and disinclines us from being generous.

DAVE BAST

Yes, so we have to teach our children how to give. It is one of the basic life lessons that they need to learn; and maybe you are saying: Well, I never was taught that. I didn't have any good examples. I was raised in a different kind of way. How can I learn to be a generous giver? And there are actually a couple of things we can point to. One of them maybe is negative. One of the big reasons we need to learn how to give...we need to acquire the gift of generosity...is because nothing can more easily and readily kill the terrible sin of greed or avarice, one of the deadly sins; and we have talked about the deadly sins on *Groundwork* before.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and then last program, we said the first deadly sin of pride is what hinders service and being a servant. Right; the deadly sin of greed is what hinders giving and giving generously and just being a generous person; but of course, we should point out, Dave, that this is also a fruit of our salvation. This is not just Paul giving you good advice like Dr. Phil or something. This idea about being generous, that comes as a fruit of salvation; and we can maybe remember the example of a wee little man from the Gospel of Luke, Zacchaeus.

DAVE BAST

He was kind of a poster boy for what it means to be greedy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

His job was as a tax gatherer, and under the Roman system, they would bid out those jobs to people who would then use every means they could to squeeze every last bit out of people so that they could keep more for themselves...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And when he wanted to see Jesus, Jesus stopped, and in that wonderful story, you know, he was up in a tree. Jesus said: Come on down. I am going with you; and Jesus said: Salvation has come to this house this day; and Zacchaeus in response decided he was just going to give it away—he was going to repay anybody fourfold that he had defrauded.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is very important in that story, too, Dave, to notice the order of things, because sometimes we think: Well, after Jesus went to Zacchaeus' house and then when Zacchaeus said: I am going to pay everybody back and then some, that is when he became saved, but that is not true. In Greek, when Zacchaeus comes down the tree, sometimes the translation says: He came down gladly, but in Luke in the Greek it says: He came down rejoicing; and in Luke, joy always means you have been saved. So, he was saved as soon as Jesus called him; and by the time he got home, that generous spirit was the fruit of his salvation, not the root. When you are saved by grace alone...and Paul calls it grace to give because the grace of Jesus then transforms you into a gracious person, which also will mean a generous person—a giving person.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and in this, as in every other act of service that we have seen in this series, our model is Jesus himself. So, if you want to know why we need to strive for generosity, we need to practice giving, the simplest answer is because that is what Jesus did. So, here is a verse...a key verse, really, from 2 Corinthians 8:9, where Paul speaks of Jesus' own act; and so, Paul writes:

You know the generous act (literally what he says is you know the grace) of our Lord Jesus Christ; that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

So, there it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is grace. It is so interesting, Dave, and I think we noted this on other programs, the Greek word for grace is *charis*, but it has all kinds of cognates; and so there is the Eucharist—the Lord's Supper, but Eucharist literally means being thankful; there is charismata, which means the little gracelets—the gifts of the Spirit. So, the idea is like one of those three-tiered, overflowing fountains: The grace of God overflows into our lives, and we then overflow into other people's lives, and it just kind of keeps going like that; and it all stems from that core grace by which we are saved.

DAVE BAST

The example of Jesus, it is so poignant; this verse in particular, it never fails to move me. You know, though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. One of the things we always pick up on in the Christmas story is the poverty of Jesus—the pathos of here he is, the king of the universe—God over all, and he comes into the world as this little baby lying in a cowshed, you know, in a feed trough. His parents didn't even have enough to give the proper sacrifice. They had to do the poor man's sacrifice when they took him to the Temple...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes.

DAVE BAST

Later, he would say as an adult: Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests; the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head; and when he died, all he had left were the clothes on his back. So, yes, he became poor...literally poor...for us so that we could become rich. That is an act of generosity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The New Testament will talk a lot about it, and we just quoted a passage from 2 Corinthians, where Paul, in both the letters to the Corinthians, has a lot to say about generosity and what it means; and we will take that up in just a moment.

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the virtue of giving or generosity. There is a great deal about giving in 2 Corinthians Chapters 8 and 9; in fact, those whole chapters are devoted to the subject of an offering that Paul was collecting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we did do a series on 2 Corinthians here on *Groundwork*, so we touched on some of this, but we really want to focus on the service aspect of that; and Paul does indeed talk a lot about it, and he is always appealing to Jesus' example. So, let's listen to these verses from 2 Corinthians 8, where Paul writes: And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in a rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

DAVE BAST

⁵And they exceeded our expectations. They gave themselves, first of all, to the Lord, and then by the will of God, also to us. ⁷But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. ⁸I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹For 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we read part of that last verse in the previous segment, too.

DAVE BAST

Right; that was the setup for that, that key verse; right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, it is so interesting; he was talking about the Macedonian churches, and he says they were going through a really hard time. They were in extreme poverty, and so of course, they gave more. It's like, well, how did that work? What do you mean they were in great need and in great poverty and this resulted in rich giving?! But Paul is saying yes, they did. They gave what they could, even out of their poverty, which is, by the way, exactly what Jesus did.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and notice also that he is writing to the Corinthian churches. So, we've got a North/South thing going on here. Macedonia is in the north of Greece, Corinth is in the center, and Paul is not above setting up a little friendly competition. So he says to the Corinthians: I know you excel in everything. You are the top church in love and in faith and in all this other...so, maybe you want to be the top church in giving, too...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Which is, you know, all in the service of this offering; but the other thing, I think, that is really significant about this passage, is the language Paul uses to describe giving itself. He is talking about a collection of money; and again and again, he refers to it as a grace—this grace. We mentioned grace—this gift—this basic Gospel word. Giving is a grace; the privilege, he calls it, of sharing in this service; a grace—a privilege!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

How often do we think of the offering plate in those terms?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; as a grace, and as a connection straight to Jesus on the cross and his supreme offering, because that is exactly it. So often in the New Testament when Paul and others, and Peter and John and others, when they talk about Christian living...when they talk about bearing the fruit of the Spirit or exercising your gifts, they always say that it is connected to grace. It is a result of your salvation. So, back to Zacchaeus again, that we talked about in the last segment, he gave as an immediate fruit of having been saved by grace. So, what Paul and others always say in the New Testament is that, you live as a Christian, not to try to get to heaven. You are already saved. You live as a Christian, and in this situation, you give generously because when you do that, you show that you get it...you get it! You get the fundamental dynamic of the Gospel, that it is all a free gift. So, being generous just means: Oh, I get it. That is how I got saved; because Jesus was generous with his grace. I will now go and do likewise.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is quite a bit of research done on the question of why people don't go to church, why they *do* go to church; and one of the things that often comes up in this context are people who have kind of quit church or tried it a little bit and decided they are not interested. One of the commonest complaints is: Aw, they are always asking for money.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is what I don't like about church; they are always asking for money. And you know, my take on that is, the mistake we make in the church is not in asking for money, it is asking non-Christians for money...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Of course, they are not going to want to give. Christians need to be asked for money; they should want to be asked for money; they should be shown where the opportunities are for them to give, because they are naturally going to want to respond out of this out-flowing of grace that they have experienced. They are going to want to be like Jesus; and frankly, nothing is a better opportunity to prove that you really mean it when you say I love Jesus, than the opportunity to give. Paul refers to it here, interestingly, as a way of proving the sincerity of your love. That is the phrase he uses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if we want to motivate also, nonbelievers to give, the best advertisement for that is for them to see the joy that giving gives to us, because it is just being in the whole Jesus movement; it is being Jesus, right? And so, when they see that we give joyfully because we get it, as we just said: We get it; we get it! We know who Jesus is. People are always motivated more by joy than guilt, right? So, when they see that we are joyful in our salvation, and it results in generous lives, I think that is the best contagion for others, in the church and outside the church, to catch onto the same thing.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is another thing Paul says here in this same chapter, 2 Corinthians 8. Toward the end of the chapter he writes this: ¹³Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard-pressed.

So, in other words, he doesn't want them to give everything until they have nothing, so that others become rich; but he wants it to be balanced. He talks about giving in terms of equity. So, he goes on to say:

¹⁴But that there might be equality. At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality. ¹⁵As it is written, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is referring, I think, to the manna in the wilderness there...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, that is the idea, that when we all help each other, we don't have to worry that we are giving too much or that we are going to end up destitute. If we give to others, and if at some time we have a bad patch in our lives, they are going to be there for you. Paul is saying, don't give until you have nothing, because then we have got to bail you out; just give as you have been blessed, and know that if the tables are turned, and there is a day when you don't have plenty, well maybe the Macedonians will have plenty and they will bail you out. It is what you could call good momentum, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just good spiritual momentum.

DAVE BAST

Well, you might think that having devoted a whole chapter here in 2 Corinthians 8 to the subject of giving in this offering, Paul had said all there is to say on the subject, but you would be wrong, because there is another whole chapter coming up, where he talks about some of the principles about how we should give, and that is what we will look at next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and let's start with an interesting stat in the two letters that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, where he deals with more practical issues than anywhere else in his writing. He has seventeen verses on the subject of the Lord's Supper. He spends 43 verses on giving; so, next time somebody says the church talks too much about money, give them that one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Isn't that interesting; almost three times more verses devoted to generosity than to what we regard as a very, very important sacrament; but, I think that just goes to show that Paul was both trying to be theological... You know, we said a while back when we were looking at some letters of Paul, that in the New Testament, Paul always has sort of an opening and a conclusion—sort of standard letter-writing form—but in the body of the letter...in the middle of the letter...Paul always had a theological teaching, and then its ethical implications. So, in other words: Here is the truth about God and creation and their relation; here is the truth of theology, and here is what that means for your living tomorrow and today; and so, also here, Paul is all about teaching the Corinthians about the grace and the love of God in Jesus Christ, and the generosity; but then the ethical implication is: Now you go and live a generous life yourself.

DAVE BAST

So, here are some things about how we ought to practice this ordinary virtue; how we should go about being generous; how we should give; and Paul spells it all out. You know, I have a friend who is a basketball referee. You not only have to make the call to be a good ref, you have to sell the call. So, there is a style about it—there is a way of going about this; and this is what Paul says about giving in 2 Corinthians 9. Here is a famous verse to begin:

⁷Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver.

We go about this voluntarily, but with a kind of happiness about being able to do this, not because it is a tax burden on us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and to do it joyfully with whatever you have decided; and be honest about it. We remember Ananias and Sapphira from the book of Acts, right; who skimmed on their giving and claimed they weren't; and their hearts weren't in it. I mean, they were clearly just giving a little bit to make a show, holding some back, and then they lied about it, too; and well, they dropped dead, which is on the extreme side of punishments in the Bible; but, the point wasn't that they were supposed to give twenty percent or one hundred percent. No; give whatever you have decided to give, but be up front about it, and be joyful about it. Don't just do it because, you know, I need the IRS tax break, or I don't want the elder or the pastor to visit me. That is the wrong attitude...

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Give cheerfully...joyfully, as we said.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you know, Scott, you and I have both been pastors, and a common tendency for church people is, they want to be told: What is the rule? What do I have to give? And the answer is: You don't have to give anything. It is not taxation. What you decide to give...what you choose to give...and what you joyfully want to give, that is up to you. That is really between you and the Lord. I don't believe in a law. I don't believe that the tithe, for example, is a law for Christians. Paul says as much here, that the law is gone. Rather, we do it voluntarily; but here is another point: We also need to be systematic and planned in our giving. So let's not go off the road on the other side and fall into the ditch of sporadic, once in a while throwing a dollar bill into the plate, because that is not the way Paul approaches it either.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; each should give what he has decided in his or her heart to give; and there is another verse from 1 Corinthians 16...this is from the first letter...1 Corinthians 16. Paul is directly talking about the collection. Look how systematic this is: Now about the collection for the Lord's people, do what I told the Galatian churches to do: ²On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up so that when I come, no collections will have to be made. So, in other words, plan. Make this a rhythm of your life. You decide what percentage of your income, or what you can afford...I mean, don't impoverish yourself because then we will have to bail you out, but do this regularly. This is not just, oh, it is the end of the year and I will write a check to get my tax break. No; do this as just part of your Christian living, as discipleship.

DAVE BAST

Here is how we would say it in practical terms: You need to budget your giving. Just like you budget for food, for fuel, for rent or mortgage, budget your giving, too; and be honest about it and be glad that you are able to do it. And finally, a final principle: Giving is generous by Christians. Look at Christ's example

again...how much he gave. He gave until he had nothing left. A standard question that Christians sometimes ask is: Well, is this enough? Is this enough? The only answer Paul really gives is, give as much as you can. C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, I think, famously says when he talks about how much Christians are called to give, he says something like: Well, I am afraid the only safe answer is more. How much should you give? More than probably you are already.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think we want to also note, Dave, that, of course, some people are in a position to be able to give a lot, and many, many wealthy people I know do; they give very generously. It is hard to give sacrificially when you are a millionaire or a billionaire, but a lot of people do. We should also note, lest we induce guilt in some people, that there are also seasons in our lives when we cannot give much; in fact, when we have to be the receiver; and that is okay. Again, you give what you can, and that may be in certain seasons of life, relatively little, but...

DAVE BAST

Think of the manna again. If you haven't been able to gather much, you need to be given some from others; so, yes. That is very true.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, the mindset of generosity—the desire to give and to do it cheerfully and joyfully—that is the key, because again, to return to our touchstone verse of Romans 12:

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in love... ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer; ¹³share with the Lord's people who are in need, and practice hospitality.

DAVE BAST

And may we all give ourselves to that way of living in honor of Christ. Amen.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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Printed on August 16, 2025