

The Gift of Generosity

Thomas Robinson, *The Great Gift Exchange* 4, December 16, 2012

Acts 20:32-36 Paul saying farewell to church elders

³² "And now I commend you to **God** and to the **word of his grace**, which is able to build you up and to give you the **inheritance** among all those who are sanctified.

³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that **these hands ministered** to my necessities and to those who were with me.

³⁵ In all things I have shown you that **by working hard in this way we must help the weak** and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said,

'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

Matthew 10:7-8 Jesus sending disciples out on their mission

⁷ "As you go, proclaim this message: *'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'* ⁸ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. **Freely you have received, freely give."**

2 Corinthians 8:1-5. 9 Paul reflecting on helping the poor in Jerusalem

¹ And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about **the grace** that **God has given** the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very **severe trial**, their **overflowing joy** and their **extreme poverty** welled up in **the wealth of their generosity**. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for **the grace of sharing in this service** to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they went beyond our expectations; **having given themselves first of all to the Lord**, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us. ...

⁹ 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.

Philippians 2:3-8 Paul pointing to the self-giving love of Jesus

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look **not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others**.

⁵ **Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus**, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but **emptied himself**, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, **even death on a cross**.

Romans 12:6-8 Paul urging believers to give the gifts they have been given

⁶ We have different **gifts of grace**, according to **the grace given to each of us**. If your gift is **prophesying**, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is **serving**, then serve; if it is **teaching**, then teach; ⁸ if 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**.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 Paul teaching generosity to those with resources

¹⁷ **As for the rich in this present age**, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on **God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy**. ¹⁸ They are to do good, to be rich in good works, **to be generous and ready to share**, ¹⁹ thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may **take hold of that which is truly life**.

The Religious Gift Exchange

We have talked about the ambiguity of giving gifts. We learn reciprocity, obligation, debt, commercialism, manipulation, etc. We also learn whole-hearted generosity, delight, love. We learn to sense the difference in ways of giving, but can't escape the ambiguity.

People often approach God as though we have an two-way bargain with God. We give him worship, belief, some change of practices, a bit of time. In a secular age like ours, he's lucky to have us. He needs to give an appropriate return for our "sacrifices." Is he fair, good? We give him gifts. He owes us. "God, if you help me in this, I'll be good for you."

The Gift Exchange of Grace

With God, it never works that way. God is the source of everything good. All belongs to him already. In the Gospel, nothing is earned, nothing is paid. Everything is given! The story begins with God as creator – the giver of life and the wonder of the world, giver of a life capable of receiving God's own eternal life. The great story centers in the "inexpressible gift" of God's own self, God's inmost reality of love, in Jesus Christ.

But it doesn't stop there. God's grace/gift touches our life at its deepest brokenness, sin, rebellion, pride, self-destruction, so that we can learn the truth of ourselves, be healed, transformed, forgiven. We learn to live in gratitude, imitating God's love and generosity. We love because he first loved. We give because he first gave. That is who we become.

Generosity – The Language of a New Kingdom

Paul talks to the elders in Acts 20 about his own example for them. Paul worked hard as a tentmaker throughout his ministry. It was the everyday expression of his life in the kingdom of God's grace. *Freely you have received, freely give.* Paul worked not for a pension or to buy a house, but in order to be generous, to help others, to embody Jesus' call to generosity. We need to live below our means in order to be able to be generous.

We often feel the pain of suffering, difficulty, hard times, a hurtful loss, the consequences of our own mistakes. Especially when we perceive suffering as unfair, unjust, it seems to contradict God's goodness and grace. Paul told of the Macedonian believers: "*severe trial ... extreme poverty ... overflowing joy ... wealth of generosity.*" Their suffering forced them to see what their faith/their life really meant. What really lasts. They knew a joy that rose from the gift of God's love/grace. They wanted to imitate that grace.

They found themselves part of a new story that made sense of their lives. They had been locked in a poverty without life or hope. One who was rich beyond imagination had come to share their prison to set them free and to share his riches. It was like a great adventure that had really happened. God had actually given himself for and to them, and now they longed to give themselves to God and for others. Their "*overflowing joy*" turned their "*severe trial*" into "*the wealth of generosity.*" Life had become whole, clear. They wanted to share. They knew that money is not wealth. Generosity is wealth.

Giving Gifts Beyond Christmas

It's a way of life. Everything that we have – money, time, talents, spiritual gifts, energy – has been freely given by God. Our response is to hand the gifts on to others. Share God's kingdom, take hold of life, cast out demons, *freely you have received, freely give.*