

CHOOSING GENEROSITY:  
**Flexing Our Generosity Muscles**

**2 Corinthians 8:1-15**

**Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri**

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The pastor was meeting with the church organist, planning his annual stewardship sermon. He said, "When I close my sermon, I will ask everyone who is willing to increase their annual giving by 10% to stand up. When I do that, you play some appropriate music." "And what music would be appropriate?" asked the organist. "The Star-Spangled Banner," replied the pastor.

And speaking of church organs, let me tell you about Andrew Carnegie. As a child, he grew up in poverty. As an adult, he became wealthy in the steel business. At a relatively young age, he sold his steel business and started giving away his money, believing that wealth might ruin him. In the process, he endowed 2,811 libraries and bought 7,689 organs for churches, the purpose of which, he said, was "to lessen the pain of the sermons."

Generosity. A powerful subject. Not just generosity with our money; generosity of spirit, of being non-judgmental, generous with our time and listening, generous in our estate planning for future generations, generous in forgiving and generous with our talents. Jonas Salk was a physician at the University of Pittsburgh who developed a vaccine for polio. When polio had eventually been eradicated in 1955, Salk was speaking at a press conference. When asked if he would apply for a patent, Salk replied, "There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?" Generosity! To paraphrase the late great preacher George Buttrick, we eat what other hands have harvested; we wear clothes we did not stitch together; we drive on roads others have built and breathe liberty others have fought for [*Jesus Came Preaching*, p. 94]. It's through the generosity of others that we are here!

Generosity is contagious. It is habit forming. It is possible to build generosity muscle. Let me explain what I mean. The Bible passage we read this morning breaks in on a conversation between the Apostle Paul and the Corinthian church. Paul was taking an offering for the poor, beleaguered Christians of Jerusalem, where a famine was raging. Now to make his point, Paul points out that the churches to the north of Corinth up in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, etc.) were being very generous. They were flexing their generosity muscles, even though they themselves were poor. *The Message* puts it this way: "Incredibly happy, though desperately poor." He says churches in the north are poor, suffering hardship, but so joyous in giving. By contrast, the Corinthian church was relatively well-off, free from persecution...and joyless!

Let's listen in. Their "extreme poverty" (v. 2) is literally a down-to-the-depth poverty. But the generosity is described as open-hearted, open-handed kindness. And then in v. 4, Paul says that they asked for the privilege, or the pleasure of giving. Years ago a man told me that a friend of his kept giving to his little boy expensive gifts. The man asked the friend to please stop. Her

reply was, "I don't have any children of my own. Are you going to rob of this joy?" That's when the man said he knew that giving is one of the noblest experiences a human being can have. Generosity. E.A. Robinson once wrote there are two kinds of gratitude: The sudden kind we feel for what we take; the larger kind we feel for what we give. Let's face it: Generous people are happier people! And research is showing generous people are healthier people! Generosity!

So one example of generosity is the group of churches up north. But there's an even stronger example of generosity. It's Christ on the Cross. It's God's heart. Read v. 9. "You are familiar with the generosity of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us--in one stroke he became poor and we became rich." William Barclay wrote that the sacrifice of Jesus did not start on the Cross or even at Jesus' birth. It began in heaven. In God's heart [*The Daily Bible Study Series--The Letters to the Corinthians*, p. 229]. At the center of God's heart is generosity. And as God's image-bearers, we will be generous. It's God's DNA in us.

And there is one other part to this habit of flexing the generosity muscle. We can't just talk about it. We have to do it. Verses 10-11 remind us that good intentions are not enough. One of our members tells about the time he was making a home visit during a capital campaign here at FBC (this was back in the day when they came to your house and asked for a pledge!). One person listened politely to the appeal and the church's plans. Then he said proudly, "Well, we're not going to give anything, but if we were, it would be a lot!"

I think scripture is calling us to a reality check. In my mind, I may think I'm really generous. But when I look at my check stubs or electronic debits, does reality line up? In my mind, I may think I am a really good listener, but is that what others say? I may think I am generous with my time for others but is it true? Paul says deliver deeds of generosity, not just words.

I can't talk about generosity of spirit without mentioning Francis of Assisi, born in 1182, and in the news now more than ever because the current Pope took his name. Francis was raised in comfort and was attracted to a life of adventure. He became a knight and one day met a leper while riding through the country. Overcome by God's nudging, Francis shared his coat with the leper and kissed the man's diseased face. It changed Francis' life. He began to re-imagine his life in light of the gospel, renounced his father's wealth and inspired millions, even today, as he sought to renew his church [adapted from *Common Prayer*, Shane Claiborne, et. al., p. 466]. Generosity. Christ became poor that we might become rich.