

THE JOY OF GIVING
The Joy of Sharing God's Blessings (2 Corinthians 8:1-12 NRSV)
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There are several sayings people often confuse as word for word from the Bible. Sayings like,

- Cleanliness is next to Godliness.
- God helps those who help themselves.
- God will not give you more than you can handle.

And while there may be some truth in those statements, you won't find them in the Bible.

Another saying is this: "Money can't buy you happiness."

Sometimes I've joked and said, "You say money can't buy happiness, but it can buy me ice cream and that makes me happy.", but there is a general understanding, especially the longer you live, that money indeed can't buy you happiness.

But what if we're wrong? What if money can buy happiness?

Elizabeth Dunn, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia, and Harvard Business School marketing professor Michael Norton are the co-authors of *Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending*. According to their book, money can buy happiness – IF you're spending it right, and by right they mean spending it on others, not on yourself. According to their research, much of what drives happiness is not money itself so much as the connection with another person — or an experience — that spending can generate.

Author Sam Kean wrote in the Atlantic five years ago that, "We've long known that there's a clear, consistent link between generosity and happiness: surveys done around the world, of many different societies, have found that giving produces high levels of satisfaction and well-being in the givers." ⁱ Basically, science is learning we are actually hard-wired and created to be generous, that we experience a little jolt of dopamine or pleasure when we spend money on others – regardless of the amount. Our Creator wired us for the gift of generosity.

So, money can make you happy when it is spent on or for others.

Being generous can make us happy.

Being generous can bring us joy.

You know one person who wouldn't be surprised by this research?

The Apostle Paul. In fact, I can almost hear Paul giving a massive eye-roll to the research and saying, "No duh. I wrote about that back in 55. Not 1955. Literally 55!"

Paul was incredibly passionate about helping new believers learn the ways of Jesus. Paul was so transformed by the love of Jesus, so changed by the grace of God, that he devoted himself fully to helping others be transformed by Christ as well, helping them to grab hold of the life worth living. And he spent a good deal of his writings – which is a good portion of the New Testament in the Bible – talking about giving and generosity and stewardship.

Why would he do that? One of the critiques we so often hear about the church is that we're always talking about money. And to be sure, there are some pastors and churches who are very abusive and self-centered in their teachings on this matter. But Paul's desire, and our desire, is for people to experience the abundant life God dreams for us; to experience life-giving relationships with Christ and each other ... and with money.

2 Corinthians 8-9 contains the most complete teaching in the Bible on generosity. If you know the church of Corinth, it might seem a bit strange that Paul's letter to them is where we find the Bible's clearest guide on generosity. As the kids say today, Corinth was a hot mess and hardly seemed ready to learn a theology of stewardship or taking care of what you have.

As the kids say today, Corinth was a hot mess and hardly seemed ready to learn a theology of stewardship or taking care of what you have. It might seem to make more sense for Paul to write instructions about generosity to the more mature follower of Jesus at Philippi or Ephesus.

But that is because generosity and stewardship isn't just for the spiritually mature. We tend to think about stewardship and generosity as something God calls us to once we have it all together. But that's not how Paul thinks about generosity. Generosity is for everyone. Generosity is a gift from a loving God to us and Paul wants us all to experience the blessing of the grace that is generosity and he urges the believers in Corinth to step into God's grace in this way.ⁱⁱ

Let's read together some of Paul's instructions on generosity found in 2 Corinthians 8:1-12. He has written another letter to the believers there in Corinth, and this part of the lengthy letter starts with a story about another group of churches in Macedonia.

Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor.

The churches in the Macedonia province were suffering. Persecution was pervasive for the early church and there were also points of conflict within the churches. The poverty of the Macedonian Christians was probably a part of the poverty of the whole region, which had suffered badly under the Romans, but add persecution to the mix and the Christians would have been near the bottom of the social classes. Yet, Paul was clear ... even though desperately poor, they were incredibly happy as evident in their generosity.

The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford! —pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians. This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard.

Paul dedicated about five years of his ministry to collect money from Gentile or non-Jewish Jesus-followers in order to alleviate suffering in Jerusalem among some of the Jewish followers of Jesus. The Jewish Collection or Offering was something that Paul invited Gentiles to give to as an expression of the transformation that had taken place in their lives as followers of Jesus, but it appears from Paul's word, that he had not asked the Macedonian churches to participate in the collection. But they heard about it And they wanted to be part of it. Paul says, they pleaded, they begged for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians. Why? Why would this group of desperately poor believers give more than they could afford?

What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives.

Paul says their generosity was a result of God at work in their lives. Their joy at giving, their burden for helping out despite their circumstances, despite their poverty, despite the persecution was the overflow of the goodness and blessings of God in their lives. They weren't focused on what they didn't have, they were focused on what they did have, and it was God. And God was enough.

Now, Paul, after giving what he hopes is an inspirational story about another group of believers, turns to the Corinthian believers. It is a little bit of a risk ... like bragging about one child hoping to motivate the other ... which sometimes works and sometimes makes it worse. So, Paul starts with some genuine compliments about the good work the Corinthians have been doing, and then a challenge for them to remember the joys of giving.

That's what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the relief offering to your attention, so that what was so well begun could be finished up. You do so well in so many things—you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're passionate, you love us—now, do your best in this, too. I'm not trying to order you around against your will. But by bringing in the Macedonians' enthusiasm as a stimulus to your love, I am hoping to bring the best out of you. 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. So here's what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. Your heart's been in the right place all along. You've got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it. Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can't. The heart regulates the hands.

While Paul shared the story of the Macedonians to inspire, they were not the standard for giving. Paul says the only standard for giving is the love of Christ, who gave it all away for us.

Why did the Macedonians give? Because God's grace enabled their abundant joy and extreme poverty to overflow with a wealth of generosity during a difficult time.

Why should the Corinthians give? Why should we give?

Because God's grace enables our abundant joy and all our resources – whatever that might be for each of us - to overflow with a wealth of generosity to and for others.

Because generosity invites us to care for one another, to build and protect community.

Because generosity is win-win.

While working as a journalist for the Chicago Tribune in 2005, author Lee Strobel was assigned to report on the struggles of an impoverished, inner-city family during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Strobel was a devout atheist at the time but would later become a believer and author of the best-selling book, *The Case for Christ*.

But in 2005 Strobel had not come to believe yet and was simply a student of the human story. In December 2005, Strobel shared in the Tribune the story of the Delgados—60-year-old Perfecta and her granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny. They had been burned out of their roach-infested tenement and were now living in a tiny, two-room apartment on the West Side. There was no furniture, no rugs, nothing on the walls—only a small kitchen table and one handful of rice. That's it. They were virtually devoid of possessions.

In fact, 11-year-old Lydia and 13-year-old Jenny owned only one short-sleeved dress each, plus one thin, gray sweater between them. When they walked the half-mile to school through the biting cold, Lydia would wear the sweater for part of the distance and then hand it to her shivering sister, who would wear it the rest of the way.

But despite their poverty and the painful arthritis that kept Perfecta from working, she still talked confidently about her faith in Jesus. She was convinced he had not abandoned them. There was not a despair or self-pity in her home; instead, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace.

Strobel completed his article, then moved on to more high-profile assignments. But when Christmas Eve arrived, he found his thoughts drifting back to the Delgados and their unflinching belief in God's providence. In his words: "I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation. Here was a family that had nothing but faith, and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially, but lacked faith—and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment."

In the middle of a slow news day, Strobel decided to pay a visit to the Delgados. When he arrived, he was amazed at what he saw. Readers of his article had responded to the family's need in overwhelming fashion, filling the small apartment with donations. Once inside, Strobel encountered new furniture, appliances, and rugs; a large Christmas tree and stacks of wrapped presents; bags of food; and a large selection of warm winter clothing. Readers had even donated a generous amount of cash.

But it wasn't the gifts that shocked Lee Strobel, an atheist in the middle of Christmas generosity. It was the family's response to those gifts. In his words:

“As surprised as I was by this outpouring, I was even more astonished by what my visit was interrupting: Perfecta and her granddaughters were getting ready to give away much of their newfound wealth. When I asked Perfecta why, she replied in halting English: ‘Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.’ That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. I asked Perfecta what she thought about the generosity of the people who had sent all of these goodies, and again her response amazed me. ‘This is wonderful; this is very good,’ she said, gesturing toward the donations. ‘We did nothing to deserve this—it’s a gift from God. But,’ she added, ‘It is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus.’”

To her, this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything—more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of Strobel wanted desperately to know this Jesus—because, in a sense, he saw him in Perfecta and her granddaughters.

They had peace despite poverty, while he had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while he only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while he only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual, while he was shackled to the shallowness of the material—and something made him long for what they had. Or, more accurately, for the One they knew.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The generosity of the Delgados in their extreme poverty ... like the Macedonians ... overflowed from the grace of God and the generosity of Jesus Christ. They first gave themselves unreservedly to God. Everything else was an overpowering of God at work.

Paul’s words to the Corinthian believers and to us today about money is this: **Generosity is not about what God wants from us. Generosity is about what God wants FOR us.** It is to accept the invitation from a loving God to experience the JOY of giving, the joy of receiving, managing, and sharing God’s blessing; the joy of not being owned by what we own; the joy of joining God and each other in being Christ’s love and hope in our community and our world through living generous lives.

ⁱ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/05/the-man-who-couldnt-stop-giving/389531/>

ⁱⁱ <https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/pauls-strange-reason-for-why-we-should-be-generous/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christmas* (Zondervan, 2005); submitted by Eugene Maddox, Palatka, Florida. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/november/8112006.html>