

I read this week that economists in the US and England are saying we are in what will be the longest recession since the 1910s. We know everything is more expensive, war is waging abroad, and we have an election coming this Tuesday which will likely end in many painful reminders of our division. With all this calamity, what are we inclined to do? Hunker down. Hold tight. Conserve and self-preserve. Yet, we are nearing the end of the year and that is the giving season where all the non-profits send out stuff to ask for your money, and Fellowship Dallas is one of them. And as you scan the horizon of all that's going on, you might receive these requests with an epic "Ugh!"

I get it. I've had my own journey of generosity over the years. I grew up in some lean times with a lot of fear and control over money and a lot of suspicion around anyone asking for it. I remember the first giving conversation Martha and I had after we got married. She initiated it, because she was more holy than me back then (not as much now!) and, while I can't remember my exact words, I told her there was no way that could happen. We had bills to pay, we couldn't afford it, and isn't that what rich people do? She persisted and proposed an amount... and I think I fainted. I held on so tightly. But something has happened over the last 22 years. I started to study and obey God's Word and his grace began to loosen my grip. We started to give, and you know what? We still had enough. Then we gave a little more, and a little more, and we still had enough to pay the bills. Additionally, my heart was changing towards God as he was changing my heart through giving, and we were blessed by seeing how our giving blessed and impacted others. Today, it is a source of great joy for Martha and me. And I am here to tell you that can be true for everyone in this room.

This morning we begin a new series called *Joyful Generosity*. We are going to look at what God has to say about our stuff and giving. Many of you know the stats: While the Bible has around 500 verses on prayer and around 500 on faith, it contains over 2,000 verses on money. Sixteen of Jesus' thirty-eight parables deal with money and possessions, as does one out of every ten verses in the New Testament. Why? Because money is a big deal. Our bank statements are theological and spiritual documents, and giving is ultimately a heart issue. And if we are making room for Christ to captivate our hearts as we abide in him, we've got to spend some time on this topic.

[2 Corinthians 9:6-7] ⁶The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Paul is gathering a collection for the Jerusalem church from all his missionary stops and, while the Corinthian church has pledged to help, it appears they may be waffling, so Paul writes to call them to generosity. Through it, he gives us God's heart for giving and the opportunities and difficulties we may face. This morning I want to look at what he says in v7, "each must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion." How do we decide to give and what gets in the way? Before we talk about where, who, and what happens when we give, I want to discuss the objections we may have and then give you five magnificent truths about God that will influence our decisions around generosity.

Let's look at the objections Paul lays out. All the reasons we may struggle to give can be summarized in reluctance or compulsion. We hear reluctance and may think "hesitation", but

Paul uses a word that means “unhappiness marked by regret”. You’ve heard of buyer’s remorse. Well, Paul is talking about giver’s remorse. This is what I had in the beginning. We believe if we give we won’t be able to pay for what we need or want. We’ll go hungry or we won’t be able to get that new _____. Our eyes are focused on us because we believe our money is all for us.

The other reason is compulsion. You ever give a gift to someone you really had no interest in giving it to? You get invited to a wedding of a person you barely know and you ask, “do I really need to get them a gift?” And so, you give one with a begrudging heart, or you don’t give it at all. A gift given under duress can feel more like extortion than blessing. God wants us free from both those concerns but, to get there, we need to look at God’s heart for generosity, both his own towards us and how he calls us to respond in kind, his view of our resources and why he gave it to us in the first place.

God is abundantly generous and we are made in his image. If we are going to talk about our hearts, we have to talk about God’s because he’s put his heart in us.

John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he GAVE his only Son.

John 6:63 – It is the Spirit who GIVES life.

John 14:27 – Peace I leave with you; my peace I GIVE to you.

Mark 10:45 - The Son of Man came to GIVE his life as a ransom for many.

James 1:5 - If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who GIVES to all generously.

James 1:17 – Every good and perfect GIFT is from above.

Romans 8:32 - He who did not spare his own Son but GAVE him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously GIVE us all things?

This is but a tiny sample of all the verses that speak of God’s overwhelming generosity. For our God, giving is not a sometimes thing, and he doesn’t give us scraps. God gives all the time and gives his very best to us, ultimately himself. Do you give this way? This was one of the most compelling thoughts in my generosity journey. When I began to recognize all God had given to me, I began to wonder how I could possibly withhold anything from him. We are in a broken and uncertain world, so a scarcity mentality may make sense. But when we give our best to God and do so regularly, we are acting in our most natural state because we are made in his image, and we have the heart of Christ. One of my favorite times is when someone tells my boys they are acting just like me. Well, when you give generously, you are acting like your Father in Heaven.

God owns everything. God is the creator of all, and he who creates, owns. Don’t believe me? Right now, there is a three-year-old building something amazing in our Kid’s Ministry, and if another kid tries to take it for himself, the creator kid will yell “Mine!” Well, God is more beneficent than that, but the principal is still the same.

[Psalm 24:1] ¹ The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.

Everything, including you, is owned by God. When we recognize that it will change the way we view our stuff and change the belief that it’s ours to do with as we please. We are not owners. We are stewards. A steward takes care of something that belongs to someone else. Maybe some of you have house-sat before. You get to live in the house and enjoy the surroundings, but you

also have to take care of it. Our heart for generosity will change when we have a new define-the-relationship talk with our stuff. When we can confess “This isn’t mine. It’s yours. What do you want me to do with it?”, our relationship changes, and so will our use of it.

God gives everything and does so for a purpose. This is a dollar bill. The only reason I have it is because God gave it to me, and the only three things I can do with it are spend it, save it, or give it away. I guess I could also eat it, but that wouldn’t taste very good. Just listen to the abundance of grace God pours out in 9:8-11.

[2 Corinthians 9:8-11a] ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written, “He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.” ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way.

This is a passage full of promise. We’re told that God takes care of those who are generous. **All sufficiency in all things at all times means our needs will be met.** We don’t have to hold tightly to what we have because we’re afraid we may not have enough if we let it go. God pours out his grace to fulfill the needs of our life. Generosity actually increased my recognition and gratitude to God for all I had. When you start thinking about giving you realize how much you have and you realize how much God loves you. Look at all he’s given me! And as I give it away, I never run out. That changed my security around my possessions. They stopped owning me because my security did not rest in them. In God’s upside-down economy **the more I gave away the more I knew I would always have enough.** It can be the same for you.

Paul is also saying **God gives to givers.** God pours out his grace on us not just so we can take care of ourselves but also so we can pour it out on others. You have been enriched in every way to be generous in every way. Not only do you have a God-given purpose, every dollar you own has a God-given purpose, and the purpose of a lot of those dollars is to bless and care for someone else. Generosity is a good work God wants us to abound in, and he gives us all we need to do that. His gracious provision is the fuel of our generosity. If we believe that, it will change our outlook on our stuff. Satisfaction no longer comes from storing it away or spending it on ourselves. Research shows those with the most stuff usually have the highest levels of anxiety because we’re constantly trying to manage all the stuff. But if we let God make our hearts generous and provide the means to be so, satisfaction comes from giving it away. It comes from knowing you met someone’s needs; that your life isn’t about what you have but about what you do with what you have.

Now, a quick word on how this verse has been abused, particularly in the world of the prosperity gospel. This passage is often taught by saying if you give, God will make you rich. That you give a dollar out of one pocket and two dollars miraculously appears in the other. And for this to happen all you have to do is send a seed offering to this guy on TV. Don’t believe it. Don’t do it. God will provide. But he enriches you not to make you rich but so that you can be generous in every way.

God cares less about the size of the gift and more about the size of the heart that gives the gift.

In the next few weeks you will be getting a letter from me and it will likely say how much we need to finish on budget for the year. That number will have a few zeroes in it, and you might think “I can’t make a dent in that, so why should I bother?” Well, two reasons. First, every gift helps. More importantly though, **every gift matters because every gift matters to God**, no matter the size. We see this in story of the widow in Mark 12. They were taking a collection, wealthy people were putting in large gifts, and this widow comes along and puts in the only two pennies she had to her name. You know what Jesus said about her?

[Mark 12:43-44] “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

She gave a bigger gift in Jesus’ eyes because of the size of sacrifice it was for her and the trust she showed in doing so. She was so committed to the Lord that she gave all she had and trusted him with the rest.

You see, we read we shouldn’t give reluctantly or under compulsion, and a lot of people use this passage to say, “I shouldn’t give until my heart is right.” That’s not what Paul is saying. He’s coming out of the Law that commands the tithe. We know that as 10%, though if you add up all the Law commands it’s over 20%. But it was demanded, automatic and, potentially, thoughtless. Here Paul is telling us to not be held back by the tithe but to go crazy with our generosity. To open us up to what God might ask of us. To make sure that, as our standard of living increases, so does our standard of giving. God is asking in a way that tests your heart and shows your faithfulness, love, devotion and trust in him. That may be \$5, or it may be \$500,000. Only you and God know what it truly costs you, and he’s asking you to give your heart to him and give your dollars based on that.

Get your heart checked.

If each one should give what we have decided in our heart to give, we need to check our heart to see why we have decided what we’ve decided. I want to encourage you to pray a bold and courageous prayer this week. Lord, show me my heart as it pertains to generosity. See if you are reluctant, if your attitude is lacking, or if you are eager to give. It is an uncomfortable prayer but it’s a necessary one, and it will be fruitful, if you let it. Confess if you are wrestling with security and satisfaction in your possessions instead of finding that in God. Ask if you are holding on to your funds to serve only yourself. And then ask him to change your heart to be as generous as him. I’m confident he’ll answer that prayer and, as he does, you will see **generosity is not as a process to be separated from our money but as a practice of worship, thanksgiving, blessing, joy, and transformation.**