

**GENEROSITY:
God's Extravagant Providence**

**2 Corinthians 9:6-8
1 Timothy 6:17-19**

*We are generous in response to all
God has given us.*

A sermon preached by
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In my Wednesday Night Life class this week, we talked about our spiritual journeys. Everybody has a different journey—different highs, different lows, different challenges and struggles, different achievements and victories. It's all part of the process of salvation: God calling us, forgiving us, redeeming us, and molding us into the likeness of Christ. I shared my story with the class—the high points, the deep, dark valleys, and the sense that through it all, God has been with me, leading, guiding, and correcting my path.

Dane and I were riding back from a meeting in Hot Springs on Friday, and we were discussing careers in ministry. He asked me if it ever kind of stung to think of what might have happened if I had stayed somewhere a little longer or been appointed to a different place than I was (and I've had some options down through the years).

It's a good question that I've thought about before, and my answer is still the same. I am so thankful for every twist and turn in the road of my life, because they all brought me here. There were challenges and obstacles along the way, and some of the times were just really hard. But they all led me to this place. What would my life be like if I had never met and married Carey? What if I had never had a daughter who was born into my life when she was fourteen? What if I had never had the opportunity to be a pastor at First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith? I don't even want to think about it. Through it all, God has provided and blessed me abundantly. It's all good.

We have been talking for the last four weeks about Bishop Robert Schnase's book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. The last of the five practices is Extravagant Generosity. It's about the way we use our money, whether it is directed toward our own satisfaction or toward the purposes of God's Kingdom. The way we use our resources, our wealth, our stuff, strikes at the very core of our spiritual life. Schnase writes that all faithful Christians, from the beginning until now, "have discovered a truth as sure as gravity, that generosity enlarges the soul, realigns priorities, connects people to the body of Christ, and strengthens congregations to fulfill Christ's ministries. Giving reflects

the nature of God. Growing in the grace of giving is part of the Christian journey of faith, a response Christian disciples offer to God's call to make a difference in the world."¹

Generosity is one of the gifts of the Spirit that Paul names in Galatians 5.² It is a critical piece of our Christian life and growth. Generosity is based on our gratitude for all God has given us. It is empowered by our vision of the Kingdom of God and the mission of the church. Generosity is not about the church's need to pay the bills or meet a budget or even receive any money at all. Generosity is about the need we have as Christian disciples to give back to God in response to God's gifts to us.

Let's think today about the ways God has provided for us. This requires a shift in the way we think. We have to realize that many of the aspects of our life are not of our own doing. If we look with the eyes of the world, we see what *we* have made of our lives, what *we* have earned, what *we* deserve, what *we* have accomplished. There is luck, both good and bad, and chance and tragedies and mistakes, and we just try to make the best of it.

But if we see with the eyes of faith, we understand that the list of God's blessings and gifts is long: life itself, the creation we live in, our families, our vocations, our community, even our possessions are gifts from God. When tragedies strike or we make mistakes, God is there to bring good out of evil, to offer comfort, healing, and reconciliation. That's all God at work, too.

When we think about the church, every blessing that has been provided for us has come through someone's generosity. Think about it. Every chapel and sanctuary ever built, every musical instrument ever played in worship, every pew or chair that has held us up off the floor, every room where we have gathered for Bible Study, choir practice, or meetings, every loaf of bread and cup of grape juice that we have consumed at communion, every window that has let God's light in or looked out on our mission field, everything that has provided a way for

us to know God and follow Jesus is the fruit of somebody's Extravagant Generosity.

Paul spoke of the connection between generosity and providence in our first Scripture reading today: *"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully—generously—will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to **provide** you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."*³ If we will till the garden, God will provide the fruit.

Evangelist Bruce Wilkinson, in his sequel to *The Prayer of Jabez*, shares the story of an old African woman who demonstrated faith in God's power to provide. Although she lived in a tiny mud hut, she had taken on the responsibility of caring for 56 orphans.

A mission group from Wilkinson's ministry had arrived in this grandmother's native country to plant gardens. On the final day of their visit, they came to her tiny home, surrounded by the orphans in her care. It looked like the old woman in the shoe, if you remember that nursery rhyme. All around the hut, there were little patches of tilled ground, but oddly, no plants were growing in any of them.

The volunteers learned that, earlier that day, the woman had told the children to dig lots of gardens. They didn't have seeds or money to buy seeds, so the orphans asked why they needed to break up the ground. The grandmother responded, "Last night I asked God to send someone to plant gardens for us. We must be ready for them when they come."

Wilkinson's volunteers had come with hundreds of ready-to-plant seedlings. God sent them to the very place where one of God's servants had prayed for God's help. The faithful grandmother and her children were ready when the answer came.⁴

Our practices of faith are direct responses to the fruitfulness of God in our lives and in our church. Schnase writes, "Radical Hospitality. Passionate Worship. Intentional Faith Development. Risk-Taking

Mission and Service. Extravagant Generosity. These five practices are so critical to the fruitfulness of congregations that failure to perform them in an exemplary way leads to the deterioration of the church's mission. Ignore any one of these tasks or perform any of them in a mediocre, inconsistent, or poor manner, and the church will eventually decline, turn in on itself, and die away."⁵

So we are going to take four weeks here in October to think together about Extravagant Generosity. Last year our church leaders agreed to spend some time intentionally developing the understanding of Christian stewardship in our church—the Biblical and spiritual meaning of giving. We hired Horizons Stewardship Company to help us with a capital campaign in the spring, with the understanding that they would come back in the fall and help us do a more robust campaign for our annual giving. In the meantime, I read Schnase's revision of his *Five Practices* book, and I was looking for an opportunity to share these insights with the church.

When I met with our Horizons consultant this summer to start planning this campaign, which is called *Taking the Next Step*, he showed me a little devotional book they wanted to use in the campaign. It was *Practicing Extravagant Generosity* by Robert Schnase! I had the feeling I was being led. Then I looked at the calendar, and there were four weeks in September after Labor Day this year and four weeks in October to do *Taking the Next Step*—a perfect fit! I took it as a sign from God. So here we are.

In the next four weeks, we are going to do some important things together. We want you to think and pray and talk among yourselves about your response to God's generosity. How generous is God wanting you to be in your regular, annual giving? Many of you have already been generous with the Faith Forward capital campaign, and you will have to take that into consideration.

Read the devotional book you picked up in church or that we mailed you. It won't take five minutes a day. Then spend five or ten minutes in meditation or prayer about what God is saying to you. Pay attention

to that prayer marker we put in the books. It has a really nice prayer and suggestions for other things to pray for. For generosity to grow, the campaign has to be grounded in prayer.

During the month, take stock of your financial situation. How much income do you receive? How much do you give? What is the proportion of your income that you give to God now? Analyze it; put a pencil to it; figure it out. What proportion would you like to give? How can you get there? You may have to think about making some lifestyle changes to reduce or eliminate debt so you can give more to God and less to the bank or the credit card company.

By the end of these four weeks, if you have read and prayed and thought and done the math, I believe God will lead you to a good decision for your generosity. Maybe you won't be able to commit to tithing yet; that's OK. The important thing is to start somewhere and to know where that somewhere is. God will bless whatever your next step is if it's a step in faith.

Our God is a God who provides for our needs. God's ultimate act of providence came in God's Son Jesus Christ. On the cross, Jesus provided a way for us to be reconciled to God and to be forgiven of all our sins. In the resurrection, Jesus provided a way for each one of us to experience eternal life when we die. No matter how generous we become, we can't touch that. We can't outgive God.

When we gather around the Lord's Table and share the sacrament of Holy Communion, it is a celebration of this providence of God. The fact that Jesus used food—bread and wine—to symbolize what he was about to do reminds us of the simple provision of our everyday needs. But in this holy meal, these simple elements speak to us of a much greater truth—that we have a Savior who was willing to die to bring us back to God, that we have a way to overcome sin and be reconciled to God and to one another (because sometimes our human relationships are out of whack, too), that we can have life that is abundant and eternal, now and forever.

As we prepare to come to this providential table, let me share with you again these wonderful words that Paul shared with his young friend Timothy: “*As for those who in the present age are rich (and that’s us, Americans), command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*”⁶

This is life, and it really is life. By the providence of God, we have come to this moment in this place, and it’s all good!

¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 133.

² Galatians 5:22-23.

³ 2 Corinthians 9:6-8.

⁴ Bruce Wilkinson with Brian Smith, *Beyond Jabez* (Multnomah, 2005), 147-148.

⁵ Schnase, 163.

⁶ 1 Timothy 6:17-19.