

# *God is So Good!*

## *The Secret of Overflowing Generosity*

A Message Offered by  
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*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints-- and this, not merely as we expected;*

*They gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you.*

*Now as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you --so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.*

*For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something-- now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has--not according to what one does not have.*

*2 Corinthians 8:1-12 NRSV*

This lesson sounds a lot like an excerpt from a stewardship letter, doesn't it? That's exactly what it is. At the time Paul was writing the church in Jerusalem had been really struggling financially, perhaps for over a year. There was a famine in the land, and the people of the Jerusalem Church – “the saints, “Paul calls them – were really hurting. So in previous

months Paul had asked all the missionary churches to do what they could to send money to Jerusalem. Each church responded with a pledge of support, including the churches that Paul had founded at Corinth and in the province of Macedonia—in what we would now call northern Greece and Turkey.

Corinth was a relatively wealthy city, right on a major trade route, and it seems that the Corinthian Christians responded generously to Paul's plea – at least at first. The problem is, they never followed through on their pledge.

In our Scripture lesson Paul writes to them to encourage them to finish what they started. He uses the example of the Macedonian churches to get the Corinthian church moving. These congregations—which included Thessalonica, Berea, and Philippi—fulfilled their pledges and even gave beyond their means, and they did it joyfully, eagerly, sacrificially, and—presumably—on time.

The amazing thing about this was that the Macedonian Christians were almost as desperate as the Christians in Jerusalem. These churches did not have it easy. In that region Christians were already being persecuted for their faith, and as a result according to Pastor Kevin Higgins “Christians could not work, could not buy or sell or trade for goods. They were not allowed to participate economically, socially or politically, and as a result they found themselves in deep poverty. In fact, the word poverty in verse 2 means that they were *beggarly* poor.” [From a sermon by Kevin Higgins on SermonCentral.com]

Where else but in God's world does abundant joy plus extreme poverty equal overflowing generosity? Pastor Mike Hays has commented that

If we add these ... variables together in our day we would come up with an outcome entirely different than the outcome Paul witnessed. We would encourage the Macedonians to keep their money because they really needed it. We would encourage them to look into the possibility of securing government funds to help them through their difficulties. We would say, "We need to take up a collection for you." The Macedonians trusted in God, they walked with God, and they knew that God would provide for them as long as they were obedient to living out His will for their lives.

From a sermon by Mike Hays on SermonCentral.com

So they gave.

They didn't just give what they thought they could spare, they gave *beyond* their means. This isn't to say they gave to the point of bankruptcy – though no one has ever gone bankrupt giving to God's work – but they did give more than they thought was “comfortable.” They gave until it hurt. But the paradox is that they still gave with joy. Perhaps a better way to describe what they did is that they gave until they really felt it. They were truly cheerful givers.

Such giving is over-rated. I'm reminded of

The mother who said to her little daughter, “Here is a ten dollar and a one dollar bill. When we get to church I want you to decide which one to give in the offering.” The mother could hardly wait until the service was over to ask the little girl which she had given. “Well,” the little girl said, “I was all ready with the ten dollar bill in my hand, but just before the offering plate came by, the man in the robe said ‘the Lord loves a cheerful giver.’ I knew I'd be much more cheerful if I kept the ten, so I gave God the dollar.”

Rev. Lynn Malone (SermonCentral.com)

Don't get any ideas. God *loves* a cheerful giver (see 2 Cor 9:7), but I bet he'll tolerate a cranky one too.

So how did the Macedonians do it? What was their secret to living lives that overflowed with generosity? Paul tells us: “they gave themselves first to the Lord.” When it comes to giving our treasure to God's work, the first gift has to be ourselves—to God. When we give our hearts to Christ, the rest of our lives naturally follows – even our wallet goes with it.

Once you fully give your life to Christ, other giving decisions flow pretty easily. It's not, “what's my ‘fair’ share, but what is the *most* that I can do for God?” It's “not how great is the need?” It's “what difference can my gift make?” It's not “how much should I give away, but how much do I dare to keep for myself?” Win Cleland encouraged us last week to ask ourselves one more question that can really focus our thinking: “What percentage of

my income – or *our* income; this is often a family decision – do we feel God is inviting us to give this year?” It’s a simple question.

If this question sounds absurd or if you’re simply finding it hard to give this year—to church or anything else—it might be because you haven’t fully given your heart to God—perhaps you don’t fully trust Him. There’s something inconsistent about someone saying they trust God with 100% of their life and then giving only 3% of their income toward what God is doing in the world. Gamblers would call that hedging your bets, and it’s the worst kind of “playing it safe.” It’s like saying you want to soar with eagles but insisting that you get to keep one foot safe on the ground at all times. Faith doesn’t work that way. At some point we need to go “all in.”

It’s not that we don’t love God. I think it’s that we’re afraid. Many of us are simply afraid that we’ll somehow run out of money. But in his letter Paul tells us and the Nervous-Nellies in the church at Corinth that

*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.*

*2 Corinthians 9:8*

There’s just no way we can out give God. Do we believe this? If we do, then growing our giving, even in tough times, becomes a whole lot easier. The first step toward experiencing overflowing generosity – is giving ourselves to God.

After lifting up the Macedonians as an example, Paul shifts gears a bit. He appeals to Corinthian pride. Apparently the Corinthians felt pretty good about who they were as a church. We can tell from Paul’s letters to them that they had great faith and were blessed with all kinds of spiritual gifts. They probably thought that they were pretty generous, too. I think we all feel that way.

But Paul knows that they are capable of even greater things. He tells them

*...as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you --so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.*

*2 Corinthians 8:7*

Many of us try to excel at so many things – be great parents or grandparents, aunts and uncles, great spouses, employees, great friends, fast runners, outstanding students, you name it. Then why do we so often settle for average when it comes to our giving? Paul suggests that we ought to strive to *excel* in generosity, too.

Fifteen years ago Ted Turner was quoted in the *New York Times* challenging his friends in the billionaires club to stop trying to *accumulate* the most and start trying to *give away* the most. It was right about that time that he pledged a billion dollars to the U.N. In recent years Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Mike Bloomberg have jumped on the generosity bandwagon, with each pledging huge amounts of money toward health and anti-poverty efforts around the world.

This is wonderful, of course, but it still doesn't reach the levels of generosity of the Macedonian Churches – or most third-world churches today. God measures our giving not in dollars but in *sacrifice*. Bill Gates can give away \$50 billion from his abundance and still have plenty of money to buy a small country. But the Macedonians gave out of their poverty—the only abundance *they* had was an abundance of joy.

When we think that we can't do more for other people – that if we get one more letter asking for money we're going to scream -- we've got to remember that Christians in Honduras, India, Lithuania, Mexico, and Haiti all give proportionately more of their resources to God's work. And as hard as things are here, it's far worse in those places.

There are some people in our Second Family who are really struggling financially right now: out of work, savings dwindling or gone, waiting for the economy to turn around – and yet they still give – generously, sacrificially.

What if we were to join them and follow Paul's suggestion – to make it our goal to “excel” in giving – to not just be an average giver, but one who tries to give their very best, based on our unique circumstances.

One way to do this is to stretch yourself through incremental giving.

If your household income is \$75,000 and you're giving \$2500 a year, that's a little over 3% of your income. What would it take to move up to 4%? Just \$500 a year more; ten dollars more a week; a little more than a cup of coffee a day. And that extra \$500 might be the \$500 we need to start a new ministry here, help a struggling mission elsewhere, or help someone pay their rent. Remember, this isn't a competition: generosity isn't about outgiving *others*, it's about outgiving yourself—and growing in faith by stretching beyond what's comfortable, safe, and familiar.

Whenever I preach a sermon like this I know two things:

- First, it's going to cost me something. You see my family is on a faith journey, too, and God is calling us out into deeper waters with him.
- Second, at least some people are going to hear this message in the wrong way. It's going in one ear and right down their spine. But giving should never be a matter of guilt, oughts, or have tos. It just doesn't work when it is forced. The only way we can give at Macedonian kinds of levels—5, 7, 10 percent, or more of our annual income—is if *our* generosity is rooted in joy that flows from first experiencing Jesus' generosity. When we realize what Jesus gave for us -- his life, his grace, his *all* – we can't help but trust that no matter how much we give to him, we'll still have enough.

We don't know how the Corinthian Church responded to Paul's letter, (unfortunately there's no "Third Letter to the Corinthians" to tell us) but we'll soon know how *we* respond to Paul's teaching. Next Sunday is Consecration Sunday. We are already a generous congregation – generous with mission giving, generous with grace and forgiveness, generous with sharing time and talents. But are we excelling in giving the way we do in so many other areas? Can we do more? I bet we can—not through our own power, of course – but through God's power at work in us.

As you prepare to make your giving decision this coming Sunday,

- First give yourself to Christ once again. Pray something like this prayer: "Everything I have is yours, Lord. *I'm* yours, too. I trust you with every part of my life."

- Then consider what “excelling in giving” might look like for you or your family. Increasing your giving by just 1% of your annual income is manageable for many people and, collectively, it would represent a huge increase in the amount of funds your Second Family has available for God’s work.
- Finally, think about how much God has done for you in Jesus Christ. As your heart overflows in gratitude for his gifts, a wealth of generosity will surely pour out. Amen.

### *Discussion Questions*

Why do you think the poor give proportionately more of their income than wealthy people do?

Do you think of yourself as poor, rich, or middle class when compared with your neighbors or friends? How about when compared with people in Honduras, Haiti, etc.?

Why do you think the Bible encourages us to measure our giving proportionately (i.e. as a percentage of our income) rather than in absolute dollars? If you find this confusing consider the example of Bill Gates giving billions vs. the Widow’s Mite – see Mark 12:38-44): which one gave more?

What might you say to someone who says, “I love God and trust Him with my life, but I just don’t like to give my money away to charities....” Is it possible to love God and not be generous toward others?

Is it possible to give *too much* to God’s work?

What proportion of your annual income do you currently give to God’s work? What would it take for you to grow your giving by just 1% of that income?

The Old Testament standard for giving is 10% of one’s income. Is this realistic today? What kinds of life changes would it take for you to reach this level of giving? Would it mean sacrificing any true necessity in your life?

*Dear Friend,*

*I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at [www.GrowWithSecond.org](http://www.GrowWithSecond.org)*

*Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.*

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