CHRISTIAN GENEROSITY

2 Corinthians 9:6–15

Key Verse: 9:13

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”

Can people tell who you are? Usually not, right? They may see our ethnicity, or our general appearance, and quickly imagine some things about us. And they might be right in some ways. But usually they’re pretty wrong. As they say, you can’t tell a book by its cover. But the Bible tells us that as Christians we should, in some sense, stand out in the world. We should seem different. How can people tell we belong to Jesus? It might be through our words, what we’re saying, but more often it’s by what we’re doing. In today’s passage Paul concludes his encouragement to the Corinthians to participate in the special offering to the poor believers in Jerusalem. Through collecting this offering Paul wants to provide suffering Christian brothers and sisters with practical help. But he also wants to build trust, respect and a beautiful Christian community among people who are very different and who live very far apart. In this passage we learn the tell-tale traits of God’s people, all those who’ve received the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In chapters 8 and 9 Paul has been asking the Corinthians to prepare an offering. He concludes in this last part (9:6–15) by encouraging them to be generous. The word for generosity appears in verses 5–13 seven times; Paul also mentions it in 8:2. Actually the whole Bible encourages us to be generous (e.g. Dt15:7,8; Ps112:5; Pr19:17; 28:27; Isa58:6,7; Mal3:8–10).

Why is it so important to give generously? Read verse 6. By saying, “Remember this,” Paul is making it a solemn warning. He likens giving to sowing seed. Why would anyone sow sparingly? Maybe they’re skeptical of the results. Maybe they’re worried they’ll run out of seed. Maybe they’re just lazy. But Paul states a life principle here—whatever you put in, that’s what you’re going to get back. If you put in a little, you’ll get back a little. If you put in a lot, you’ll get back a lot. This same principle is repeated in the Book of Proverbs and in Galatians (Pr11:24,25; 22:9; Gal6:7,9). But is it always true? Sometimes some people did nothing and just got lucky. And often it seems we put in so much yet get so little back (Ecc11:6). How can it always be true? It may not happen in this life, but in eternity all our efforts will be justly rewarded by God. This is our faith. Ultimately, we should give generously because our God himself is a most generous God (cf. Ps65:9–13). Our Lord Jesus described our Father God: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”; he said we should aim to be like him, live like his children (Mt5:45).

But what does Paul mean by “generously”? Read verse 7. This verse tells us that generosity can’t be forced. Real generosity is never reluctant. Generosity has to come from one’s heart. It’s not necessarily about the amount, but about the heart and the spirit behind it. As we know, money is relative. Some people who have a lot of money may seem to be giving generously, but the amount they give is actually easy for them. Others who are poor may seem to be giving very little, but what they’re giving really hurts (cf. Mk12:41–44; Lk21:1–4). Paul said in 8:12, “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.” So it’s not really about the amount; generosity is about having a willing spirit. Paul adds here that real generosity is accompanied by cheerfulness. Some people give, but they’re crying inside because they’re so sorry to be losing what they’re giving. Paul doesn’t want that; he wants a generous gift that’s willing and cheerful.

How can we live as generous people practically? Read verse 8. What stands out here is the phrase “God is able to bless you abundantly.” Ephesians 3:20 says he is “able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” Wow! It calls us to reflect on how great God is. If we only look at our bank account, income and expenditures, and plan our risk management, we might curb our generosity. But if we remember who God is and what he can do, it changes everything. It tells us that there’s a spiritual dimension to our giving. When we give, God blesses us abundantly. The prophet Malachi told his people that if they gave to God, he would “open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it” (Mal3:10). Incredible!

Paul says here in verse 8, “in all things at all times, having all that you need.” It tells us that when we give generously, we don’t need to worry, because God blesses us with what we need, with “just enough.” We also learn here that God’s blessing is more than material things. Paul says, “you will abound in every good work.” So, being truly rich, truly blessed, is not about accumulating wealth; it’s about being able to do many good things for others, all throughout our lives. So Paul says elsewhere, “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” (1Ti6:18). Some rich people are actually poor in spirit, and some poor people are actually rich in spirit. Only when we’re rich in spirit can our lives “abound in every good work.” God’s true blessing is to live a life full of good works done for him and for others.

To support this, Paul quotes Scripture. Read verse 9. This is a quote from the famous Psalm 112. This psalm is closely connected with Psalm 111. Psalm 111 describes God, and Psalm 112 describes his people. Because of who God is, God’s people are basically generous people. It says they freely scatter their gifts to the poor. They are not shaky or fearful or insecure; they’re free to be generous. Why? Because they’re very confident about who God is. If we truly believe in God, our lives should look like this. We should look like people who’re always free and willing and generous to give.

Paul repeats the analogy of farming in verse 10: “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.” It’s a loose reference to Isaiah 55:10, which describes who God is and what he does for us. We learn some important lessons here. First of all, we shouldn’t be giving so that we can use God to get richer. It says here that he will “enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.” God wants to bless us with more than material wealth; he wants to bless us with a “harvest of righteousness.” What is that? Hosea 10:12 says it’s the “fruit of unfailing love.” Ephesians 5:9 calls it “the fruit of the light…all goodness, righteousness and truth.”

And in verse 11 Paul goes on to describe what he’s thinking about when he mentions “a harvest of righteousness”: “You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” We learn two things here. First, “on every occasion.” Some people are generous only when it’s comfortable for them; but here Paul is describing a generosity “on every occasion.” It tells us that for God’s people, generosity is a constant lifestyle. Even when we’re poor we can be generous. We may not have much, but we can always share what we have, even an extra item of clothing or an extra piece of food. Whenever we encounter a needy person, we can be generous and willing to share.

Second, generosity that results in thanksgiving to God. If we know a generous person, we tend to focus on that person, on how great they are. There are many non-Christian philanthropists who are generous with their wealth. They get their names put on buildings or charitable foundations. But those who are generous because of their faith in Jesus have a different influence. They don’t draw attention to themselves, but to God himself. Through their generous lives they help many others experience God’s grace and God’s glory (4:15). Paul repeats this idea in verse 12: “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.” It still applies today. We thank God for the power of his grace which is still able to change people into such generous givers.

Read verse 13. Basically Paul is saying that the Corinthians’ generous offering would show that they are really true Christians. He says they have “proved” themselves. He says their offering would be an act of “obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ.” Actually, the Bible often tells us to prove our faith by what we do. James 2:14–17 reads, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

We confess the gospel of Christ when we believe in our hearts that it’s true (Ro10:9,10). But our faith doesn’t stop as a hidden secret in our hearts; it follows through with obedience to our Lord Jesus in our practical daily lives. Giving is an important part of that. Our Lord Jesus Christ says to us all, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Lk6:38). He challenges us all to be givers. There are many people, even Christians, who think people should always be giving to *them*. They always emphasize their neediness. It’s really endless. They need God’s deep inner healing of their souls, minds and hearts. They need to realize that Jesus is calling us all to be givers, not takers. Only when we take that step of faith in obedience to Jesus can we experience God’s overflowing blessing. When we learn to obey his command to give, people can see that our faith in Jesus is real. So someone said, “One act of faith is worth more than 10,000 theological arguments.” Look at verse 14. Paul says here that giving generously is God’s surpassing grace, and it inspires heartfelt prayers for the giver.

Read verse 15. Paul concludes by focusing on God and his “indescribable gift.” What is it? John 3:16 famously says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God’s “indescribable gift” is his giving his one and only Son for this dark and wicked world. How could God give like that? Someone called it “crazy love.” Paul writes, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro5:8). When we give generously we may be tempted to get self-righteous. But when we think about the indescribable gift God gave us, whatever we give pales in comparison, and we can only thank and praise God.

In this world of takers, may God make us givers. May he inspire us through who he is and what he does for us to be generous not only with material things but also with our spirits. May God help others to see his grace through our practical lives, and inspire them to know how great and how generous God is.