

A Generous Heart Is Good Medicine

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II Cor. 9:6-15

The story is told of a couple who moved into a new neighborhood. On the first morning in their new home, as the couple was having breakfast, the woman noticed her neighbor hanging laundry on the clothesline. She said, "My, that laundry looks dingy. She should try another detergent." Her husband didn't say a word. A few days later she saw her neighbor hanging laundry again and said that it still looked dingy; "maybe I ought to suggest a new detergent to her." Her husband said nothing that morning and the next several mornings as his wife complained about her neighbor's dingy laundry. A few days later, the woman noticed that her neighbor's laundry was sparkling clean. "Well, what do you know; someone must have told her." Her husband replied, "No, dear; I got up early this morning and washed the windows."

"Oh, to see ourselves as others see us," the poet wrote. Paul wrote that we mortals see through a glass darkly this side of heaven. Jesus said, "Don't complain about the speck in your neighbor's eye when you have a log in yours." Good advice, rarely taken.

I

The Good Book says that "a cheerful heart is good medicine." I believe that, not only for individuals but for society as well. Because laughter breeds laughter, and smiles are contagious. They also release endorphins and serotonin in the brain, which not only make us feel better, but also lower the amount of stress in our lives. I have discovered that a *generous* heart is good medicine too. That's because it really is better to give than to receive.

According to Paul, God created us for good works – for love, for giving. That is why we are here: to love God and one another. I don't know about you, but I am sick and tired of listening to the apostles of greed tell us that in order to have a happy, successful life you have to have a lot of money, fame, and power. I'm sick and tired of CEO's trying to justify salaries that are 450 times the average workers who make the things that their companies sell. Ten years ago it was only 45 times. I'm, also sick and tired of hearing about golden parachutes, stock options, derivatives, sub prime loans, hedge funds, and other such things I don't know much about.

America has created a culture of greed and egotism that is unprecedented in our history. The income gap is widening in American, while the rich get richer and everyone else gets poorer. Jesus said that where our treasure is there is our *heart*. He warned about the dangers of wealth; it

has tendency to become our god and divert us from worshiping the true God and entice us to invest ourselves in things that can vanish at the sound of a bell on Wall Street. Jesus taught that the secret to life is generosity, love, sharing, caring, and compassion.

In the end, we get to keep only what we have given away. Davidson College has a newly-endowed chair in reformed theology and social justice. It was recently created by a generous gift from a couple whose daughter I happen to know. The husband's father and grandfather were both Presbyterian ministers, and his father died when he, the son, was only 11. His mother had to take on several jobs to make ends meet. He worked hard and won a scholarship to Davidson, where he graduated and went on to get his medical degree at Penn State.

He had a successful career as a physician and was led by the spirit of God to endow this chair that will have a perpetual influence on young college students who will be called to many different vocations, including the ministry, I am sure. This is a profile of a *grateful* man, whose success did not spoil him but gave him a grateful and generous heart. I have met this man and I have never met a more serene, happy man. Friends, we are created to give, not to take.

II

We misunderstand stewardship when we reduce God to Chief Executive Fundraiser or Vice President for Development. God is more interested in developing *disciples* than raising money. God really doesn't need our money, but God does want us to learn the virtue and the blessing of generosity, because love is the meaning of life, and generosity is the measure of love.

You may not believe this, but one of the happiest days of the month for me is not pay day but the day I sit down and write our monthly check to the church. It feels good because I enjoy giving thanks to God for many blessings God has given us. I don't feel the same way when I write a check to the US Treasury Dept. or to the power company. Our pledge to the church is not a tax or dues; it is a *thank offering*, a grateful response for the wonderful blessings we have received from a gracious and generous God. It is freely and joyfully given, not by my own lights, but by the power of the Holy Spirit who is able to produce spiritual fruit in the hearts of the faithful.

II

Those who are where they need to be in their relationship with God have discovered the joy and the satisfaction that come from developing a lifestyle of generosity. Our relationship to

the resources we have acquired *define* the kind of person we are, whether we are a generous person or a stingy one. I used to be a waiter in college, and we quickly learned who the big tippers were and who the small ones were. Paul writes in our lesson today that the Lord loves a *cheerful* giver, not one who gives reluctantly or begrudgingly but freely and willingly. This, too, is a gift from God and does not come easily. But just as the discipline of practice takes effort and causes pain in athletics, music, and art, so it is with spiritual disciples. The goal is to get to the place where the rewards of the endeavor outweigh the pain of the practice.

III

For most us, this takes a long, gradual path. For some, like Paul and Zacchaeus it can happen in an instant. I love Zacchaeus' story because it is such a radical turn-around. This wealthy tax collector, who lived on the fringe of society because people hated him for extorting tax money out of them, wanted to see Jesus when he came to town too. At least his wealth had not stunted his curiosity and quest of knowledge. His growth had been stunted along the way, so he had to climb a tree in order to see Jesus above the great crowds that had gathered. Perhaps the best he had hoped for was a glimpse of this famous rabbi; instead, Jesus stopped his entourage right in front of Zacchaeus' tree and told him to get down and to get home and prepare a meal, for he and his disciples would be guests in his home that night.

I would have loved to have seen the reaction on his *wife's* face when he called her on the cell phone and said, "Guess who's coming to dinner?" But the point I want to make here is that Zacchaeus was so overcome with gratitude for this monumental display of grace and generosity on Jesus' part that, without prompting, he vowed to pay back all the money he had defrauded people of with 400% interest and to give half of what was left over to the poor. Now, that's a generous man. That's a grateful man. I tell you; that's a happy man. I doubt anyone else in town was as happy as he, except maybe Jesus.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. Jesus tells us to count to *ten*. To put our treasure where I heart is and to give back to God a tenth of what we have received from God's gracious hand. Paul reminds us that our stewardship, like everything else in life, begins and ends with God, the source of all life and all blessings. The primary fact of the gospel is that God is good, gracious, and generous towards us. This should generate faith on our part, which leads to our redemption and reconciliation, which then ought to lead to gratitude which manifests itself

in good works, for which we were created, and chief among these good works is love, whose right hand man is generosity. Does this make sense?

I think it does only to those on the *inside*, to those who have *received* the unconditional love of God and undergone a radical transformation. Christians are not saved by our good works; but Christians who have received the grace of God cannot *not* do good works. These good works are essentially reflexive, involuntary responses to God's grace. James was right: faith without works is dead. A genuine experience of God's grace will lead inexorably to good works. Paul believed that God's generosity leads inexorably to thanksgiving to God. As God reaches out to more and more people with grace it produces more and more thanksgiving to God. This process of generosity creates a superabundance of blessings.

The test of our faith is the generosity that God's grace produces in us. And Paul says that we will be *enriched* in every way for our generosity. Does he mean that this is a safe investment in our future financial returns? No, I think he meant that we will be blessed with *spiritual* rewards, not material. Love leads to more love; generosity leads to more generosity. Remember, it is far better to *give* than to receive. I am going to say Amen and show you some more pictures of happy, generous people involved in our ministry and mission. Dim the lights and roll tape!

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