

## Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity

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II Cor. 9:5-15

In 1999 I was blessed with the privilege of traveling to Villahermosa, Mexico with a group from White Memorial Presbyterian Church to work on the Presbyterian Seminary that we have been helping to build for the past several years. It was a marvelous experience, as many in our congregation who have gone can attest. The most profound memory I have is of a meal that was served to our group near the end of our stay. We had traveled far out into the countryside to this little country church down a one-lane dirt road that separated two large fields. The road was so narrow that if you opened a car door on either side it would have hit the fence.

The road led to a clearing where an unpainted, cinderblock one-room church building sat. The building had no windows or doors, just openings, and a concrete floor. We led a worship service after which we gave the children stuffed animals (some of them had never owned such a toy) and the adults clothing that we had brought with us from Raleigh. After the service was over they led us out to the front yard where they had set up a very long table and fed us one of the most delicious meals I have ever eaten. The fruit drink they had prepared was made from fresh mangoes, papayas, pineapple, and coconut. It was the sweetest, best tasting drink I have ever tasted.

As we began the feast, the members of this small congregation gathered around and served us generous portions of roasted chicken along with fresh vegetables and fruit from their fields and orchards. Then I suddenly realized that our hosts were not joining us for dinner. After they had served us, they stood in a large circle around the table and watched us eat, with affectionate smiles and a look of satisfaction that can come only to the faces of people who are watching others enjoy generous hospitality. I will have to say that this made me feel a little awkward. After the meal, when I asked someone from our group why they hadn't joined us, I learned that these humble, generous folks had spent a week's wages on this sumptuous meal for us and frankly could not afford to eat that night.

It brought tears to my eyes – and joy to my heart, to realize the *enormous* gift those people had given us. I can still see the look of genuine joy and peace in their eyes. After I managed to fight off the feelings of guilt, realizing that these gracious people were spending a fortune on our dinner, it dawned on me that their sacrificial giving probably brought *them* more

joy than it did *us*. And refusing their gift or offering to pay them for it would have deeply wounded them. That enchanted night was one of those *magic moments* in my life when I discovered that it is truly more blessed to *give* than to receive. For that is how God built us, and we are forever unfulfilled until we understand this and live it. In the end, the only things we get to take with us are the things we have given away, because giving enlarges our soul and strengthens our character.

## I

Last Friday night I attended the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Ligon Middle School, because our daughter, Anna, was singing in the chorus. They sang a song written for the occasion by a former choral teacher and graduate of the school. It was entitled *Climbin'*, *Climbin'*, based on the story of Jacob's ladder in the Old Testament. But what moved me more than the beautiful song was the teacher's personal testimony before they performed it. In the sixties when she was teaching in the choral department, the president of St. Augustine's College called her and asked if she could pull together and direct a chorus from the college students to sing at an event to be attended by Dr. Martin Luther King. She agreed, and the students were so moved by the experience that they asked if they could stay together as a chorus and continue singing.

She told them that she didn't have time in her busy teaching schedule to rehearse with them, but they insisted and volunteered to rehearse early in the morning before school started. She was so overcome by their commitment and dedication that she agreed to do it. Those zealous students showed up every morning to rehearse and formed a choir that traveled throughout the eastern United States singing at schools, colleges, and churches. She was brought to tears when she remembered their selfless devotion to their God-given talents and cried out like a preacher when she said, "I may not have much money, but I have had a lot of love in my life! And I am deeply grateful." Her tears brought tears to our eyes too.

Friends, the gospel would teach us, if we would listen, that the meaning of life is measured by values like love, humility, compassion, and generosity, not the values that are touted by Hollywood and the media. Just look at how Jesus lived. He didn't come from royalty or graduate from the University of Jerusalem or attend Hillel Seminary. He didn't hang out with the movers and shakers in the Jerusalem but with fishermen, tax collectors, and other assorted

sinners in Galilee, far from the halls of power and influence. His father was a carpenter, and so was he. He answered God's call at age 30 and taught of God's love to the masses, healed the sick, fed the hungry, and shared hospitality in the homes of simple folks, who were considered outcasts by the elite in Jerusalem. Yet, this man's life was filled with love and compassion for all God's people, rich and poor alike. He was love incarnate –in the flesh. And he lay down his life so that the world could be forgiven of its sins and be reconciled with God.

## II

He came to show the world that the purpose for which we have all been created is to love God with every fiber of our being and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It is just that simple – and that difficult. My good friend in college, Josh Henninger, turned one wall of his dorm room into a public bulletin board and invited all to write anything they wanted there. You should have seen some of the sayings. Actually, on second thought, maybe you shouldn't. But one has always stuck in my mind. It was right beside the one that said, "In life sometimes you get the peanuts, and sometimes you get the shells." It said, simply, "There are two kinds of people in this world: *givers* and *takers*."

Jesus came to teach us that it is more blessed to be the *former* than the latter. We are human beings, not animals who live by the law of the jungle: eat or be eaten. God has created us in the image and likeness of God, just a little lower than the angels. God has given us a mind, a will, and a soul – the ability to know the difference between good and evil, and the capacity to love. This gift of freedom is a great blessing that is fraught with the potential for great evil, as the Hitler's and Stalin's and Ben Laden's of this world have taught us. You and I have the capacity to be either saints or sinners or some combination thereof. It's our choice.

Everyday we get out of bed and go to work or to school and have it within our power to love God and our neighbors and to pray for our enemies as Jesus taught. Or, we can chose to walk on the dark side and live selfishly and meanly, looking out for number one and stepping on everyone who gets in our way. It's our choice. Many people think, wrongly, that money and fame and power will make them happy and fulfilled, and they are wrong. Jesus told us that we cannot serve two gods at the same time, try as we may.

## III

This year I am proud that our church has reached out to people in need in our community and across the world. We have given food to the Food Bank; raised \$1,200 on the CROP Walk;

cooked and delivered meals to the Ark Shelter; traveled to Villahermosa to help build the seminary; tripled the amount of money we normally send to our missionaries, Dan and Elizabeth Turk in Madagascar; supported Loaves and Fishes, Meals on Wheels, and given generously to Pennies for Hunger, One Great Hour of Sharing, Christmas Joy Offering, Presbyterian Women's Birthday Offering; Peacemaking Offering, Pentecost Offering, and the Good Samaritan Fund. And we helped several families have a good Thanksgiving and Christmas. And to top it off, we have designated 10% of our capital campaign pledges to local and international mission over the next three years.

Friends, this is no small thing. This is central to what Jesus calls us to do. In Matthew 25 we learn that on Judgment Day the Lord will not ask us what we *believe*, but if we gave food and water to the hungry and the thirsty; if we clothed the naked and visited the sick and the imprisoned? (From an address by Dr. Doug Ottati at the meeting of the Witherspoon Society at the meeting of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) in Richmond, Virginia, June, 2004). We will not be asked what we *believe*, but what we have *done*. For, James was right, "faith without works is dead." And so was John when he said that those who say that they love God and hate their brother or sister are liars. Harsh words, but genuine faith leads to genuine love and to action that backs it up. To quote that famous theologian, Forrest Gump, "Christian faith is as Christian faith *does*."

#### IV

Today is Pledge Sunday. I hope the pledge card you have already filled out and are ready to present for consecration is an accurate reflection of the gratitude you hold in your heart for God's grace in your life. If it isn't then I hope that you will get down on your knees when you get home today and consider making it so. Life is not about you or me or our needs and desires; it is about God and our relationship with God and one another. It is about acknowledging God as the *Source* of our blessings and being grateful in our hearts and faithful with our wallets and our calendars, giving back to God an appropriate portion of those blessings. It is about living in right relationships with God and one another. It is about discovering the joy of giving that leads to the fruit of the spirit. Paul was right. "Each one of us must do as we have made up our minds, not reluctantly or under compulsion, because God loves a cheerful giver... And that we will be enriched in every way for great generosity.

Friends, we live in a world that is out of control. If you don't believe me just click on the TV when you get home or pick up the daily newspaper. Look at the hollow values celebrated by our culture. Look at the war and conflict around the world and how people overseas are plotting to attack us because of their hatred and misguided religious fervor. Our nation is out of control, spending billions on an extravagant lifestyle that is going to be hard to justify come Judgment day. We all need to show a little restraint in our appetites and lifestyle and become more *generous* in our stewardship. We need to honor God and our parents and to keep the Sabbath holy, not just by coming to church to worship on Sunday but by how we live and treat one another every day.

The Christian faith never has made much sense to outsiders looking in. It has its own inner logic and strange calculus. Someone once asked a Christian what he said when he prayed to God. She replied, "Nothing; I just sit and listen." The person asked, "What does God say to you?" She replied, "Nothing. And if you don't understand that, then I can't explain it." When the poor widow went into the temple to pray and make an offering, she was so overwhelmed by God's grace that she threw her last two pennies into the offering plate. And if you don't understand why then I can't explain it. I can only invite you to enter into the wonderful land of grace, gratitude, and generosity that comes from following Jesus as Lord." Let us pray.

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