

## **Obstacles to generosity: Ill-discipline**

### **2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5**

You may have seen on the TV that the world athletic championships have been held in Beijing. Every time I see a big international competition like that I'm reminded of an aspiration I once had to compete on the world stage.

It was 1993 when we learnt that Sydney would host the 2000 Olympics, I was 15. I thought to myself "The year games are seven years away. Surely that's enough time to pick a sport, get trained up in it, and make the Olympic team. I could get myself tested to see what sport I'm naturally built for. I'll be 22 at the time of the games, the perfect age! Because Australia's hosting we'd have a bigger team and therefore I'd have a better chance of getting in. Here's my chance! What a great plan!" Needless to say, it didn't happen!

Why didn't it happen? Well there were a number of obstacles in the way. First of all, I didn't have access to that type of testing. This was before the internet was widely accessible so I couldn't really work it out myself; I didn't know where to go to get that information. Secondly there were other issues fighting for my attention. The HSC was still yet to come and then I became really interested in my Uni course, so the focus and discipline wasn't there. Sometimes the best and most exciting plans run into obstacles, and then tragically they come undone and the vision remains unfulfilled.

I hope and pray that you were inspired by what we talked about last week. After hearing about the generosity of the Macedonian churches, after hearing about the generosity shown to us by the Lord Jesus Christ, I hope you thought to yourself "Yes, I want to be generous!" But often our good intentions can run into obstacles. Sometimes a gap can emerge between what we want to do and what actually happens.

So in this four-week series on generosity, we're going to spend two of those weeks (weeks 2 & 4) thinking about those obstacles that can frustrate our plans for generosity.

Our first obstacle is one that the Corinthians had fallen into, and it's one that plagues men and women from every age. It's the obstacle of indiscipline; the obstacle of starting off with good intentions but where we allow ourselves to get distracted, to be thrown off-course.

Have a look back at 2 Corinthians 8:10. Last year Paul writes in the second half of that verse you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. You remember that Paul's ministry included a fundraising role; he was in the business of raising funds from wealthy churches to relieve the poverty of poorer churches. And when Paul first raised this idea with the Corinthians they immediately said "What a great idea!

We'd love to give!" And not only that, they'd even started on the actual process of giving. Paul continues to describe their initial enthusiasm in ch 9.2 I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. Their response was so strong that Paul had described it to other churches. "Oh you guys should hear what the Corinthians are planning to do". So impressive were the Corinthians' plans that other churches were moved to follow the Corinthians' leadership on this. Even the poor churches of Macedonia, after hearing about what the Corinthians were planning to do they dug deep and gave out of their incredible poverty.

But then something happened. In the 12 months or so that had passed the Corinthians had stalled. Chapter 8 v11 Now finish the work, Paul writes so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it. You see Paul had discerned that a gap had opened up between their initial enthusiasm and their ability to come good on their intentions. Again in Ch 9.5, Paul talks about finishing the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised.

So what was it that distracted the Corinthians?

Well, when you read through both 1 and 2 Corinthians you see that Paul had a rocky relationship with these guys. They had a lot of disagreements over the way church should be run, they had disagreements over church discipline, they had disagreements over Paul's own authority as an apostle. So perhaps they had trouble distinguishing between the actual need and the person who was doing the collecting. Perhaps they were allowing a personality clash to cloud the bigger issue. "Well, we don't like Paul, why should we give money for this project of his?"

I think we who are in the church today can easily fall into the same trap. Sometimes we use our wallets as a type of passive aggressive weapon; we don't like the way the church is going or we don't like the personalities that are involved in the leadership team and so we withhold our giving as a type of punishment. When that temptation creeps in —and it's a temptation for those who are committed to generosity—then perhaps we ought to ask whether we're missing the bigger picture. Is there a larger goal behind the personalities that are involved? Is our withdrawal of support going to withhold benefits from people who could really use the money? That's a subtle trap that we can fall into.

The other diversion that caught out the Corinthians is that they had lots of other church issues to contend with. —they were facing issues of factionalism and of sexual immorality— it's conceivable that the issue of giving was simply put on the back burner; it was drowned out by other stuff— and we're all familiar with this problem. We can relegate our giving to the backburner because of general busyness, or to let it get brushed aside because of other bills and costs. In many cases this is simply the product of indiscipline; we fail to organize ourselves enough to come good on what we've intended.

I remember my own indiscipline caught me out the first time I hopped on that spin bike I showed you earlier. I had used spin bikes before when I was a regular gym user and I found them to be useful form of exercise and I so I thought to myself "I'll just buy myself one to use at home!" The first morning I hopped on it I did my usual gym routine, but you see I had left a gap between my days as gym user and my days as a spin bike owner, a gap of ... about 5 years. And so the indiscipline of those 5 years came as a nasty shock. After I dismounted from the bike I spent the next 20 minutes lying on the floor trying to recover!

Indiscipline will cost you. Not preparing that presentation well-enough might cost you a promotion. Not being disciplined with your health might cost you in medical bills. Indiscipline might mean you suffer damage to your reputation. That was Paul's worry. Paul was worried that the Corinthian's failure to come good would lead to a major sense of embarrassment both for the Corinthians and also for himself. Ch 9 v 4 For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. Paul had spent the past year praising these generous Corinthians, and now there was the risk that the Corinthians were going to falter.

We've all experienced the embarrassment of not following up our words with action. Perhaps you've made an appointment—"Yes, I'll be there at 2.00 on Friday"—but then we don't put it in the diary and our actions fall short of the promise. It's embarrassing and people start to doubt our capabilities and our integrity. Don't let your giving become an embarrassment. Our own situations may be more private than the one here in 2 Corinthians, but if we realize that our intentions about giving are failing to materialize then I hope we do feel a godly and proper sense of shame within ourselves. Let's not become complacent in this area. Let's ensure that if people were to see our bank statements that there would be nothing to be embarrassed about. Remember that God himself knows about each transaction we do and don't make. As we heard a couple of weeks ago, a day is coming when Jesus returns and all our activities will be laid bare. So to avoid any potential embarrassment on that final day let's receive God's forgiveness for past mistakes and let's get things into gear!

What does getting things into gear look like? Well, I've got three suggestions there in the outline. Two taken from Paul's engagement with the Corinthians and one which Paul couldn't possibly have imagined.

One of the things that struck me when reading through this week's text is just how comfortable Paul is with the idea of financial accountability. In chapter 8 from v 16 Paul forewarns the Corinthians to expect three men; Titus and two unnamed brothers will come to collect the financial gift. In verse 23 these brothers are described as representatives of the churches and this in verse 24 Paul encourages the Corinthians to show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. On one level it feels like a set of inspectors are coming around,

inspectors sent by other churches as a form of peer review ensuring the money is given and that it makes its final destination. Of course, there is more going on here—Paul sees this visit as a genuine exercise in fellowship—but there is that element of accountability. And, just as you would expect from any respectable leader, Paul doesn't think that he is beyond scrutiny himself. Verses 19 and 20: What is more, Paul adds [the first brother] was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.<sup>20</sup> We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift.

We often think that financial giving is an intensely private thing, but on a congregational level this giving was done in the sight of others with the ensuing openness ensuring that good intentions were turned into action. So I think there is a place for some level of accountability in this area.

Now some people might quote Matthew 6.3, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,<sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. Is Jesus is commanding us to keep the matter of giving private? The context of that verse is that Jesus is speaking about the sin of giving in order to be seen by men. He's using the language of secrecy to make the point that we give in order to please God who is in heaven. However, in Luke 8 we can read the names of the individual women who funded Christ's own ministry; Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. There's no Biblical rule that says that giving cannot be spoken about. There is a rule against boasting about our giving (that's the idea of Matthew 6) But there is a place for some level of openness—not for the sake of ego—but for the sake of discipline and encouragement.

This is why in our current series of home Bible studies on this topic I've included a few questions encouraging people to speak about their giving, not on the level of declaring how much they give, but more on the attitudinal level of sharing how intentional they are. It's a just a way of introducing some gentle accountability in the form of being open about our attitudes. So that's the first suggestion in turning good intentions into reality: be open to some level of accountability.

One of the questions I've included in our Bible studies is a question about budgeting. This leads to the second suggestion we have from Paul: make sure you plan what you do with your income, make sure you have some kind of budget. In 1 Corinthians 16.2 Paul gives some very rudimentary budgeting advice: On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. Now some people budget on an incredibly detailed level, every cent goes into a spreadsheet and every dollar has a purpose. My budget is a little more relaxed, but I know what I'm getting in each month and every month I give money to church first and I live off the rest with the aim to save some and live within my means. Why? It's God's money and my responsibility is to be a good manager and to make sure it's being used to glorify him.

And when I give, I give electronically. Electronic giving, direct debit, this is a great gift for holiness, a gift that Paul would never have dreamed about. No more getting

to church and forgetting your envelope, no more getting to church having forgotten to have gone to the ATM. You can give while lying in bed! Laid back Christianity, literally! Even better, set up a scheduled payment after payday each month. Get the bank to do your Christian duty for you! Of course discipline is still needed when the scheduled payment expires or when you get a pay rise you'll need to change the details, but electronic giving is a great gift to the modern church, a way that we can easily close the gap between good intentions and reality.

Does it sound like too much effort? For some it might be, but Christianity is not a faith where we're asked to put our feet up. Salvation is a gift, salvation requires no effort but to accept the gift but the ongoing life of the ones who are saved is an active one. This is why at a number of points the NT uses the image of an athlete in training. One place is 1 Corinthians 9: Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training, Paul explains, Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. <sup>27</sup> No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave.

Paul would have shook his head at my sad and sorry attempt at Olympic glory. I think he was in awe of the athletes that he knew; he uses them as illustrations at a number of points and he wants us to consider their discipline. So what kind of financial Christian athlete are you? Even if you're playing in the lower leagues, even if you don't have much to offer, are you being disciplined with what you do have?

Let's pray that God will help us with our discipline.