

What does generosity look like? 2 Corinthians 9.6-15

Some years ago I was visiting a friend who was studying at Oxford University. As he took me on a tour of his college we passed through this stone gateway. It's called the Fitzjames gate, and you'll find it in Merton College at Oxford. If you have a look at the



picture you can see some stone carvings in the roof, you can see them more clearly in this picture here: The stone carvings depict the signs of the zodiac, —there is a bull for Taurus, a lion for Leo—but I want you to have a look at

Scorpio. Here's a close up of the Scorpio carving (sorry about the resolution). Put your hand up if you think this looks remotely like a scorpion? Where's its big stinger? Where are its claws? It looks more like an 8-legged flea more than anything else!



How could the sculptor have gotten this so wrong? Well, the sculpture starts to make more sense when you realize that the archway dates from around about the year 1500. Scorpions have only been found in Britain since the 19th century after they arrived as ecological stowaways on Italian merchant ships, so it's unlikely that the sculptor had ever seen a scorpion. He couldn't look it up on the internet, the printing press had only just been brought to England roughly 25 years before so books were probably still quite rare; he was just trying to do his best from what was obviously a very poor description. It's hard to produce the image right when you don't have anything to copy from.

Now here at Waitara Anglican we're halfway through a sermon series called "The Generous Christian". So far we've asked the question "why be generous?" and we answered "because we want to imitate the generosity of God towards us", we want to imitate his grace and foster Christian fellowship by supporting one-another. Last week we spoke about indiscipline being one of the barriers to generosity. And I shared some ideas as to how we might overcome that barrier. This week we're asking the question "what does generosity look like?" If we were to describe a generous person, if we were to explain the effect that generous person has, then what kind of picture would we be painting?

This is an important question for those who may be new to Christianity. You may have picked up that generosity is an important part of our faith, but when it comes down to practicalities you may feel like a medieval sculptor trying to fashion a scorpion! You get a sense of what's involved and you're making an effort but you're not quite sure that you are really hitting the mark. Or perhaps if you've been a

follower of the Lord Jesus for a long time; it might be time to ask whether generosity still something you practice. Does your life still look generous or have you let this discipline slip? So today we'll finish off 2 Corinthians 9 with this question in mind, starting with the specific issue of "How much?" How much money do we have to give in order to be generous?

Those of you who've been hanging around churches for some time will be familiar with the concept of the *tithe*. A tithe is a payment of one tenth of your income, so if someone were to say "I'm tithing my income" then it means they are in the habit of giving away 10% of all they get, either to the church or to a mix of different religious causes.

The concept has its origins in the OT, in passages like Leviticus 27:30 where the Israelites are commanded A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD. So imagine you're a farmer in ancient Israel and you had an orchard, one tenth of your harvest had to be given over to God and his purposes. And so many Christians today take this idea and apply it to their income.

But there are a couple of problems in doing that. When you read through the entire Old Testament it seems that the Israelites were expected to give a bit more than 10%. There were other taxes they were expected to pay and every 7 years those who had lent money were expected to forgive debts. One scholar has calculated that the rate of giving was actually 23.3%! But then again, a good proportion of that 23.3% could be spent on religious festivals within the giver's own household. So one problem with the tithe is that the OT isn't entirely clear as to how much was commanded. We know that there was an expectation to give something, at least 10%,but it isn't a straightforward calculation to work out the final figure.

The second problem is that we are no longer living under the Old Testament law, not to the extent that the ancient Israelites did anyway. Elsewhere in his letters Paul encourages us to fulfill the "law of Christ". We get our moral direction first and foremost from Jesus and his New Testament apostles. Sometimes Jesus and his friends uphold what we read in the OT, and sometimes they insist that certain OT regulations belong in the past. Sometimes they uphold the general vibe of an OT law but allow a greater level of freedom as to how we put it into practice. I think their instructions about giving fall into that last category. Have a look at 2 Corinthians 9.6-7: Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

You notice that unlike the Old Testament, Paul doesn't lay down a discrete percentage. "You decide what you're going to give" he says. He tells the Corinthians that they have freedom in this matter. But it's a principled freedom. As the Corinthians make up their minds as to the amount Paul wants them to pursue generosity and cheerfulness as values that accompany their decision. This is where we still hear an echo of the Old Testament law. The Old Testament laws about giving

were all about generosity; enforced generosity but generosity nonetheless. In the age of Christ however, Paul is encouraging us to *choose* generosity.

Do you notice the contrasting language of giving generously and giving sparingly there in v6? When reflecting on Paul's words here I've often imagined a full coke bottle, and I have one right here! Imagine if this coke is all your worldly wealth—all the wages you earn, all the possessions you own—and the Bible tells us to give some away. Now you could give sparingly. You could grab an eye-dropper, suck a bit of the liquid up and squirt the drop out into someone else's hands. You'd still be giving something away, but it wouldn't make any discernable difference to what's left in your bottle. It's giving your stuff away sparingly.

What would it look like to be generous? To be giving in abundance? Well, it would look a bit more like this wouldn't it? [start shaking bottle] What'd going to happen once I stop shaking and open the top? It's going to spread everywhere, isn't it? And then there's going to be a noticeable difference in the amount I have left; there'll still be some left for me, but not before I've shared a good amount of it around.

Because the amount we give away is a free choice, it will be different for everyone. In my time as a Christian I have heard different figures from different people. One Christian I knew gave 5% of his salary, I have heard of others who give 90%. I give around 12%. That's my figure – 12% of income derived from salary and investment. Some of that goes here, some of it goes to supporting university ministry, some of it supports a sponsor child through Compassion, some of it supports a PhD candidate in theology whom we think will be of great benefit to the church once he graduates. Plus then there are extra amounts for special needs and requests as they come up. I have heard of another minister who gives 30%. This figure won't be the same for everyone, and it will change throughout your life. Hopefully the desire to be generous will deepen as you mature as a Christian, as you come to realize more and more the depth of God's generosity to us.

This leads us to the next point on the outline: Generosity recognizes that God is the giver. Have a look again at verse 8: And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. And then again at 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. As we've already seen in this series, generosity begins with God himself. God's own generosity is shown to us primarily in Jesus Christ—On the cross Jesus gave up his own life to secure our salvation—and God's generosity continues in supplying everything we need and have.

Have a think about how much God has given you. Have a think about what's in your bank account. Have a think about what assets you have in your name. Why has God given this to you? Is it because you somehow deserve it? Is because he is more fond of you than of others? Paul has the answer for us. He repeats the answer four times,

in verses 8, 9, 10 and again—have a look—in verse 11. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. God gives in order for us to be generous.

If you walk out into the foyer and look through the glass door into my office, you'll see a whole bunch of hampers there on the floor. They've been provided to us from Barker College to give to people in need. Right now, because they're in my office, I'm the custodian of those hampers. So imagine if I decided to just take them home to stock my own pantry. That would be disgustingly corrupt, wouldn't it? The goods haven't been given for me to keep but for me to distribute! And so it is with the wealth given to us by God; he gives to us so that we can be generous to others.

Some people might ask "If wealth comes from God, then why has he made some people and cultures rich while others remain poor? That's so unfair!" Well, the problem with poverty is not that God is unjust, rather it's that the rich folk don't understand why it is they've been given their wealth. Poverty is their fault, especially if they're hoarding all that they've been given to themselves. God's plan to address inequality in the world is to do so through human agents; agents who have understood the principle of generosity.

These verses here in the middle of our text —verses 8-11—they can be a bit tricky because it seems like God is promising everyone the privilege of being wealthy distributors. He will increase your supply of seed ... he will enrich you in everyway. I'm not sure this is a timeless promise to everyone, simply because in other parts of his writing Paul does assume the existence of both poor and rich Christians, after all, if everyone was wealthy he wouldn't be taking up a collection. I think what's happening here is that Paul is addressing the Corinthians specifically. I think he's worked out that God had a financial role for this church. He could see the material wealth that they had, and so he's calling them to act. "If this is your role", he's saying, "then don't deny it. Let God help you fulfill it!" Do you think we might have the same role? Here we are in a wealthy country, in a wealthy part of a wealthy city. Maybe God's calling us to a financial ministry. If he is then he'll help us fulfill it; he'll give us what we need in order to be a financial help to others. In fact, I think he's probably given us plenty to get started with already.

Some people take these promises of material blessing a step further, concluding that God not only grants wealth for the purposes of giving but that he also grants wealth as a reward for giving. This is the so-called prosperity gospel; the idea that if you give generously from your wealth then your own personal wealth will grow. Sometimes the first verse of today's reading is quoted as proof, 2 Corinthians 9.6 Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. "There it is" they say, "if you're generous with your giving, then God will be generous right back."

But what exactly is the harvest that Paul is talking about here? I don't think it's a harvest of personal wealth, rather when we put verse 6 in context, Paul is expecting the Corinthians' giving to result in a harvest of *thanksgiving*. Have a look at the final

section of our text, verses 12-14. This service that you perform Paul writes is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God He says.

What effect are we looking for when we act with generosity? The building of our own bank accounts? The glory of our own name forever being associated with financial kindness? No, the result we're looking for is a multitude of people expressing their thanks to God. As people receive our financial support, the goal is to give them cause to thank God and to praise him for providing through us. And that makes sense, doesn't it? Especially given our own generosity is only ever meant to be an echo of the generosity shown by God in the first place. Generosity starts and ends with God, it starts with his example and it ends with praises going to him.

There's an application here for those who are the recipients of generosity. We've spoken at length about what it means to be a giver, but not much about what it means to be a receiver. When you receive gifts make sure you spend time thanking God. Thank him for his care for you and thank him for raising up others who give. By praying in this way you will be bringing the act of giving to its completion.

To end with I want to draw your attention to our first reading. In 2 Corinthians 9.9 Paul quotes from Psalm 112. If you want to hear a description of a generous man or woman of God then Psalm 112 is a great Psalm to meditate upon. One commentator I read during the week suggested that if the Corinthians had spent more time meditating on this Psalm then Paul wouldn't have had to write!

What does the generous person look like? Well, Paul picks up on one image that we find in that Psalm. The generous person freely scatters their gifts to the poor. That's the image of the coke bottle again isn't it? What we have is not kept to ourselves but we spread it around. We're like farmers on the back of a ute, throwing out hay bales to feed the sheep. Or like—here's a springtime image for you—dandelions whose seeds are picked up and carried all over the neighborhood. What we have is meant for scattering. So may the Holy Spirit pick up what we have and may he spread it around.

I'll lead us in prayer.