

Cultivating a Culture of Generosity

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 00] Okay, folks, well, great to be together this morning. Let me just add my welcome. My name's Graham. I'm the pastor here at the church. And let me encourage you to have that passage in 2 Corinthians 8 open in front of you today.

What a passage this is. And I really hope this thrills us as a local church as we get into God's word again today. But let's pray as we come to this passage. Father, thank you for this new day. Thank you for the gospel that we celebrate this morning, that Jesus came, he lived, he died. For our sins, he rose, he lives, he is at your right hand.

And so it's to him that we look today. And we just pray that we would grow this morning in our insight and in our understanding and in our love for him, all stemming from him who loved us and who gave himself for us.

So Father, thrill our hearts this morning. Help us leave with a greater picture of who you are. And this is our prayer that we make confidently in Jesus's name.

[1 : 02] Amen. Amen. So I've got an American friend called Randall. What an American name that is, right? Randall. Randall, before retiring, was a pastor on the west coast of the United States.

And Randall once told me the story about an older man in his congregation who died. And one day, a number of months later, Randall's phone goes.

And it's the lawyer for the man who's just died. And he tells Randall that the man had left the church a sum in the region of \$100,000 in his will.

Now, Randall was, as you can imagine, so incredibly thankful for the man's generosity. What an incredible heart that is. But sometime later, Randall was walking through the local hospital.

And he, as the story goes, he notices this man's name on the wall amongst the list of names of the hospital's major benefactors. And it turned out that this man had also left the local hospital a donation in his will, a sum in the region of \$10 million.

[2 : 13] And here's what Randall realized in that moment. And here's what he relayed to me. Here was his line. He realized in that moment that the local hospital had pitched this man a better vision of what to do with his money after he died than he had as his local pastor.

And here's the two morals of the story. Number one, what grabs the heart opens the wallet. Right? Remember that? Take that all the way through with this sermon this morning.

What grabs the heart opens the wallet. And it's true for every single one of us here today. No matter what you think about the God of the Bible, no matter what has brought you here today, all of us, what grabs the heart opens the wallet.

Have you ever thought about the fact that what we do with our money and what we don't do with our money preaches visible sermons to the world around us about the things that we love most? You ever thought about that? It's why people are happily paying £600 for a platinum ticket to go and see ACDC at Murrayfield when they come in August.

[3 : 25] It's why, if you're a Fulham fan, you will happily pay £3,000 for an adult season ticket to go to Craven Cottage for the year and see 19 Premier League games that only last 90 minutes.

That doesn't even include your halftime pie, which I don't imagine in Fulham is cheap. And here's my favourite. It's why Carl Lagerfield, the fashion designer for the House of Chanel, when he died, he left lots of money to his cat, Chupette.

And if you're on the ball, you'll know that Chupette now has her own maids, diamond necklaces, and she even has her own Instagram account. Our wallets follow what we worship.

And here's the moral of the story number two. If that thing that grabs our hearts is the gospel, just imagine the kingdom possibilities.

And that's what the next few weeks are going to be, just allowing God through his words to grip our hearts with a vision for radical generosity.

[4 : 38] So come with me to 2 Corinthians A and let's meet a church who have been completely gripped by this vision. This is not a random blog post on giving that Paul has dropped into the middle of his letter.

So often I think when I used to read 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, that's what I used to think it was, like he couldn't think of anything else to say. So he thought, why not do my sermon on giving? If you look at verse 19, Paul's talking about an offering.

Do you see it there? In the text, verse 19, he's talking about an offering. Verse 3, he calls it a service to the Lord's people.

Do you see it? So God has put something big on Paul's hearts. Now here is the thing that's going on in the background here of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

Paul has been collecting money from all these churches that he's planted, or God through him has planted, around what is modern day Turkey and Greece.

[5 : 43] He's been gathering money to support the Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem who are going through some severe persecution and trials. If you want to get this a modern day equivalent, maybe think of this like a first century equivalent of a just giving page.

Okay, that's what Paul's doing here. And he's not primarily interested in the figure of this collection. This isn't Red Nose Day. This is not Lenny Henry with his totalizer.

What he's really concerned about, his heart, is in the thing that this collection represents. Now if he can get Gentile Christians, so Gentile, just that word meaning non-Jew, if he can get Gentile Christians to show unity and concern for Jewish Christians over the other side of the sea, what a witness to the watching world of the unity that Jesus has created between people from all over the world who follow him.

Right? Different generations, different ethnicities, different social classes, the vast majority of whom all across the world will never meet each other.

And yet, because of their faith in Jesus, they are united together as a family. Do you not know one of the most special things if you've ever had that experience? Remember before we came to Brunsfield, Alex and I spent five months in Malawi meeting people there who are just so different from me in so many different levels and yet instantly you've got the biggest thing in your life in common with.

[7 : 19] It's incredible. This is really special. And maybe it counters the accusations of the false teachers who are saying that not only is Paul unimpressive, but the message that he preaches is actually divisive.

So if Paul can pull this off, if he can get people over on one side of the world to care about the welfare of people on the other side of the world because of their common faith in Jesus, then this is going to be a massive win for the gospel and its credibility in the eyes of the watching world.

What seems to have happened in the background is that the Corinthians had initially bought into this ethos of the collection. However, on the passing of time, that enthusiasm to be part of this giving had just fizzled out and Paul wants them to get back in the game.

How is he going to do that? Well, come with me to verse nine. What is the motivation for giving? And we're going to camp out here for a little bit because really this is the motivation and the bedrock for everything that follows over the next chapter and a half.

How can a church cultivate a culture of generosity? That's our question. The only thing that's going to work is when God's people capture a renewed sense of who God is.

[8 : 56] Are you ready for this? A little stretch as we hang out in verse nine? Here's the stretch. Our God, friends, is Trinity. You take in the panoramic view of the Bible, you find here is a God who has eternally existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He is one God, three persons. Why is that important? We'll come to the opening pages of the Bible and you find that because God has eternally existed as Father, Son, and Spirit, He is a God who gives.

Opening pages of the Bible, this God longs to give life. Here is a God who's so radically different from anything that our finite minds can comprehend or concoct.

Here is a God who is a giving God. He longs to give life. In particular, here is, as we get into the story of the Bible, here is a Father who longs to give His Son.

Do you see it in verse 9? The index of how much the Father loves us is how much He gave to accomplish our salvation. If ever you're in doubt as to whether God the Father loves me, we just look at what He gave.

[10:14] He gave His Son and the Son gave His life on the cross to save us from the penalty for our sins. And the Son rose and the Father and the Son give the Spirit.

And the Spirit, He opened our eyes to the work of the Son. Remember chapter 4, verse 6, He shone into our hearts to give us light and life.

The only reason that there's a gospel, the only reason that we're here this morning is because God exists as Father, Son, in Spirit. The only reason is because this God is a giving God.

You got it? Stretch. And Paul's particularly talking in verse 9 about the gospel. Look at it here. He that was rich, and he's talking about Jesus, he that was rich became poor.

Now take that in. Our hearts need that this morning. Jesus, the one who inhabited heaven's glory. He left it.

[11:18] He came down and he stepped down into our world, into our mess, into our brokenness, into our sin. Christmas time, he stepped into poverty and scandal in Bethlehem.

His life, he gives himself to serve the lowly and the outcast. And his death, he gave himself even to the most humiliating place over to death on a Roman cross.

He that was rich became poor. Why? So that we who are poor through what he has done for us might become rich.

He's talking materially here. He's talking spiritually. Now the rhythm of verse 9, it's got a rhythm to it, doesn't it?

He that was rich became poor so that we who are poor might become rich. The rhythm of it tells you that he wants people to remember it. More than remember it, though, he wants us to cherish it.

[12:27] And these words have been the anthem of the church down the generations, have they not? Some of us will remember that old hymn, Thou who was rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake becometh poor.

Darkness to light, guilty to acquitted, orphans to children. That word rich, it needs to grab our affections today.

That God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ. This is not he that was rich became poor so that we who are poor might get in.

No, we have been given every spiritual blessing in Jesus this morning. We are, no matter what your material circumstances are saying, you are in Christ if your faith is in him, you are rich beyond your wildest imagination, spiritually speaking.

Now have you ever heard that phrase, I'm trying not to look at anyone when I'm saying this, board of London, board of life. You heard it? Board of London, board of life.

[13:41] Love it in Fife, they have that board of London links, board of Fife, love it. Board of London, board of life. But we talk about things like that, don't we? As if there are places on this earth that can provide endless fascination and fun.

And all you need to do, looking at no one in particular, all you need to do is spend more than five minutes on the tube down in London and look at the faces of the people and that bubble is instantly burst for you, right? But that word rich, when Paul uses it here, means, dear friends, that truly there is an endless ocean of depths, of wonder and glory when we bask in what Jesus has done for us. In the words of C.S. Lewis, we are people who are far too easily pleased. We are, by nature, inward-focused people.

We throw out the boomerang of praise because we're praise-hungry creatures we long to worship. We throw out the boomerang and it just comes straight back to us. When it comes to loving ourselves, the Bible assumes that we are doing just fine.

But when God saves us and he puts his spirit in us, he begins that grand and gradual process of turning us from the inward-looking self to the outward-looking self so that we begin to reflect more of his heart.

[15:03] We are not designed to look inward. We are designed to look outwards, not self-serving. We are designed to be as we reflect the heart of God, self-giving people who love our neighbour as ourselves and love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

He turns us outward. He turns us into give people who long to give this God, this holy God praise. Now what does Paul want for this church in Corinth?

See verse 9. He wants them to excel, not in the act. He wants them to excel. Notice the language, he's picked it very carefully, in the grace of giving.

In other words, this is not something we have to do because God is this kind of God. It's something that we get to do. And when a church gets a heart for generosity, what a special spirit inspired thing it is.

Can I suggest that there is no more wonderful community to be part of than a church who has grasped God's grace. It's got under their skin and they turn outward and just want to give away praise.

[16:18] And so here's two things that happen to a church when the gospel gets into our blood steam real quick. Firstly, the gospel creates in us a big heart for places and people. So as far as churches being gripped by the gospel go, come with me to verse 1.

Here it is, says Paul, exhibit A. Paul says verse 1, do you see them? Let me tell you about the believers in Macedonia. Do you see it? So Corinth, remember the map, was in this region to the south called Achaia and Macedonia is that area to the north.

So when he says Macedonia here, this is an umbrella term for the churches in Thessalonica, Berea and Philippi. churches who are going through, do you see it, a period of severe trial and extreme poverty and yet here is the amazing thing.

They jump at the chance of joining in this collection for saints, brothers and sisters, the other side of the world who are also going through a really hard time. Do you see what he says?

They urgently pleaded with us to let them play a part. They wanted in on this. And this is the opposite of what so naturally comes to us all, is it not?

[17:39] Listen, our kids at home, they have a sweetie drawer in the bottom shelf of the cupboard in the kitchen. See, occasionally when it's been topped up, they've hit the jackpot, the stocks are high, they'll occasionally offer me a squashy or something.

But see, when those supplies are low, it's a totally different story. Right? It's what we all do, isn't it, with our things. But imagine the scenario whereby they actually begged me to accept their sweets. They came to me, they longed that I would have them, even when they had next to none. It just flips the way that we naturally think. So when Paul says they gave beyond what they were able, they earnestly begged us to be part of this, that's what he's saying.

It speaks of what? Loving sacrifice. sacrifice. We care. What a description of a church.

How does a church get to be like that? Would you not long love to be part of a community like that? He tells us how it gets to be like that. Verse 5, because they gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and otherwise they were gripped by this God of grace and what he's done for them in Jesus.

[18:58] And from there, by the will of God, also they bought into this collection. Here is a deeply generous church. Now what did they hear there was over in Jerusalem?

Verse 14, they heard there was a need. Do you see it? And they responded. And so Paul says, cheeky chappy that he is to the Corinthians.

So you kind of want to follow their example as well. Because you are going through a spell of plenty. Now remember we said Corinth is like Manhattan and Benador rolled into one.

Here's the Manhattan bit. Corinth is a place because of where it is on the map. This is a place where money is easily made. Remember verse 10, Paul says that you had that desire last year.

You're plenty. You long to be part of this and be part of supplying their need. And Paul is saying you stop doing it. Go ahead and finish what you started.

[20:06] You can argue that this is one of the major themes of this letter. He wants them to buy back into this collection. Because what is God's heart for his people? See verse 14 there?

It's equity that all his people are provided for all over the world. And that's a principle that's written into and woven all the way through the fabric of the Old Testament when God tells his people how he wants them to live.

Paul quotes there from Exodus 16. It's the episode where God provided manna and quail daily as his people wandered in the wilderness.

God's showing and saying that I'm going to provide and I'm going to provide for all of you. Friends, the gospel creates a big heart for places and people and secondly it creates in us a deep desire for honour and service.

And still talking about this collection once we hit verse 16 down Paul begins to talk about people. Do you see it?

[21 : 20] Why? I take it he wants the Corinthians and everyone else in earshot of this letter to be reassured because this is handling money in Old Testament times, right?

There's no bank transfers. You're physically going around with this. He wants them to be reassured that the best people are on the case. So often when Paul does that in his letters here's a little tip he's not name dropping like we would do.

He's holding up people as people worth emulating. And up pops our friend Titus again. Do you see him? We met him at chapter 2. We met him last week in chapter 7.

What a guy. Notice verse 16. And is it not so refreshing when people compliment others behind their backs? Here's what Paul says at verse 16.

just like God did with Nehemiah all those years before when Nehemiah was in Susa and God stirred in him a desire to go back and help God's people in Jerusalem.

[22 : 21] Here is God doing it again and he's doing it in the heart of Titus. God has put this where? Into his heart. And Titus is coming to Corinth presumably with this collection money because he too wants the Corinthians to buy into it as well.

Now see the two others mentioned here. The first brother verse 18. Just see how he has spoken about. Of course brothers is just that term for a fellow Christian man.

That's what that term means. Verse 18. He is praised by all the churches. A man of good standing. There's brother number one. Verse 22. Another brother. How is he described?

Great word if you get this in Scrabble with a Z. Zealous. Now people, if you read the commentators, they've got their thoughts on who these brothers were. Why are they nameless?

I just wonder if it's as simple as this. The fact that they're not named is the whole point. In a city like Corinth, we've seen this as we've traveled through this letter, we're chasing a name and chasing fame is the name of the game.

[23 : 38] How refreshing is it to read about two men who don't want any of the limelight? And he also talks to see about how everything that's being done is being done above board and he also talks about how everything that's being done is being done with huge enthusiasm and it's all flowing from this deep desire to help.

Verse 20, what does Paul say? We want to avoid any criticism. So he's saying we're going above and beyond to do what is right in the sight of the Lord and just notice what he says next, and of man.

So Paul cares about how God, the all seeing God sees what's going on here. He cares about the witness to the watching world. And it's true today in our culture, isn't it friends, that what really gets us going as a culture is when people are trusted with money and then it comes out, it's proven to be true that they were dishonest with that money.

You take your pick as you look at the headlines. Can I say it's why we as a church, we take the production of our yearly accounts really seriously.

It's why we produce that and make it known for absolutely anybody, anyone can take that. It's why we take things like safeguarding really seriously here. Just want to be above board because we realise if it goes wrong in these areas, the witness to the watching world will be seriously damaged.

[25 : 05] because Paul knows, let's say for example that if they leave Corinth with 300 denarii and they turn up in Jerusalem with 200 denarii, then the game's over as far as the credibility of the gospel goes in the eyes of the watching world.

So Paul is saying that we're doing everything above board, we're doing everything to be right in the sight of God and in the sight of man. What a wonderful lesson for us in life, as believers, as we witness to the world.

The gospel creates in us to see a big heart for places and people and it creates in us a deep desire for honour and service.

And so just as we begin to wrap this up this morning, here's two questions as we begin to think about maybe the real application for this for us today.

Let me just give you really quickly a what and a where. You ready for these? A what and a where. And this is going to lead us really well into next week's chapter. A what and a where. Here's the what. Really simply, what are our means?

[26 : 13] Which is another way of saying what has God given us and how can we use it for His glory? This is not about a figure as much as it's about firstly the receptiveness of our hearts.

Notice what he says, verse 12, the word beginning with W that he uses there. He talks about a willingness. Are we willing?

That's the question that Paul's asking. Are you willing, Corinthians? Are you willing? Every generation since you will read this. God calls us to be faithful stewards with what He's given us. Whenever that is right now, He's called us to be faithful stewards.

So friends, are we willing? I say we're going to be thinking about giving next week a bit more. I just say as somebody who's just about to hit 40, I wish I'd put this habit into my life earlier than I did. See, when I started earning out of university and I started getting money and all that stuff, not knowing what to do with it, I wish someone had come along in my life earlier on and said, it's all God's.

[27 : 21] God's. Because if you can establish when you have a little, it will be part of just what you do when God entrusts you with more.

And you might think, I've not got anything just now. Maybe the circumstances of your life are so that you think, actually what I can give, what I can do is really small. We all go through those phases. God is sovereign over the seasons.

But friends, this principle, this willingness to give God, to think about everything that we have as God's, if you can put it in your life sooner rather than later, it will stand you in great stead.

What are our means? And it takes us to the second question, which really is going to be a bridge to next week. Where is the need? And how can our means be the answer to that need?

Two angles on this, maybe think about it, and you can just pray about this over the next week or so. Think about the need in here. I know we heard at the age GM a few weeks ago about the financial need of the church.

[28 : 23] We're going to carve out some time next Sunday morning to hear more about that in detail, and you can be praying about that over the course of this week. But it's more than just we want to make ends meet.

It is we realize what God is doing amongst us here. Honestly, being the pastor here for a number of years, and the spiritual growth that I'm seeing amongst us is wonderful.

It's more than we want to make ends meet. It is actually how can we take full advantage of the things that God has for us, those good works that he has prepared in advance that we can walk in. Can I give you some thoughts? We'd love to be able to invest more in women's ministry. Right? We would love to get our trainee program back up and running again.

as we seek to keep being a training and sending church. And Al prayed for Archie. If you heard in the prayers at the beginning there's someone who's going to peoples that we have sent to be a blessing to another church.

[29 : 23] We don't want to be a church that hoards. We want to be a church that gives. In terms of people wanting to train for ministry, here's my observation. See, five years ago, I would say that we had the funds, but there were no people coming forward and saying, actually, when I think about full-time ministry, God's not put that in my heart.

We had the funds, but not the people. Can I just say now, it's completely flipped. And it's wonderful to hear some of you coming forward and saying, actually, I would love to consider full-time ministry. Friends, could you, what God has given you, could you be an answer to that need? To see more people trained and sent. But this is bigger than just money, you've got to understand that.

Let Titus encourage you in prayer this week. Do you see what he's saying? Verse 16, what is the Lord laying on your heart? What is the Lord, has the Lord put in your heart?

What are the areas of our country that God is putting on your heart? What are the projects that God is putting on your heart? What are the missions opportunities that God is putting on your heart?

[30 : 34] What are the opportunities that work that God is putting on your heart? Friends, where are the needs? What do we look out and see? Where are the needs? What are our means? And where is the need?

And talking of which, just as we close, let me tell you about a lady who used to be part of this church family, some of us will remember her, called Rita. Now that's a generational name, isn't it? Rita. All I can tell you about Rita, people will remember her, she was the smallest lady you'll ever meet, with the biggest heart for God I've ever seen. Right? And she saw a need in this church. She saw that when we have church lunches upstairs, in the upstairs hall, she saw that sometimes an older generation couldn't get up those stairs to join in everyone else.

And she saw that this was creating a divide in our church between the old and the young. And she wanted to help. And so for her 90th birthday, we had it down at Braith's Hells Hotel, if you go out that way.

[31 : 37] We had a massive party, she didn't want any presents, she encouraged people to give towards the start of a church lift project. And that money there was the seed fund to the lift that's out there.

Now if you go out that door, if you stay long enough and those doors are locked, you'll be forced to go out that side. You'll see the lift, that was Rita's birthday money that was the seed fund for that lift. And she died a matter of weeks, if I'm right, in my head, a number of weeks after her 90th birthday. But friends, what a legacy. She used her means and she realised there was a need and she put two and two together.

And what a blessing she has been to our church family. Because what grabs the heart opens the wallet. and so if, friends, let me encourage you, do not leave this morning without doing business with the Lord.

Cherish, if you can remember in your head, cherish that verse that he who was rich became poor so that we who are poor might become rich.

[32 : 46] Let's pray then. Philippians chapter 1 verse 9. Paul writes this, and this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Lord, we thank you this morning that we have savoured the truth that there is simply none that compares to you. A God beyond our wildest imaginations or expectations.

Father, would you thrill us with the gospel here today? Lord, for some of us perhaps who the fire in our hearts has gone cold, may a fresh sense of your love for us come.

Lord, would your spirit be moving amongst us as we think about our means and as we think about needs that exist. Lord, may we be continued to be a church that is marked by radical generosity.

Father, thank you that you are a radically generous God. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' wonderful and in his powerful name. Amen.

[33 : 57] Amen. Amen.