“Enough … Contentment, Generosity and Simplicity”

Week 2: “Generosity”

This is the second week of our stewardship series. Our theme this week is generosity.

The Scriptures speak about generosity in many places.

- In Exodus, Moses invited the people to contribute their resources to the construction of the tabernacle. (Explain the tabernacle.) The people gave so generously that Moses had to tell the people to stop giving. (Ex. 36:6,7)
- The psalmist tells us that whereas the wicked borrow, and do not pay back, “The righteous are generous and keep on giving.” (Psalm 37:16-26)
- The Proverbs tell us, “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.” (Prov. 22:9)
- Paul provides a powerful directive in his correspondence to the church at Corinth: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (II Cor. 9: 6,7)

These are only a few of many passages in which generosity is praised, encouraged, or commanded. But they illustrate clearly that generosity is an important theme in the Scriptures.

Moreover, they make it evident that there is an important connection between generosity and stewardship. To be a steward is to be a caretaker of someone else’s resources. Our modern tendency is to claim ownership over things around us. But the
scriptures tell us that “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” (Psalm 24:1). We are actually stewards of God’s resources. As stewards we are expected to responsibly manage God’s resources with generosity, particularly as it pertains to the poor.

Theological context:

Stewardship is often discussed in relationship to tithing. So before discussing generosity, I want to touch on the institution of tithing.

Tithing is an ancient practice of giving one tenth of one’s produce.

In Genesis (14:20), we are told that Abraham gave a tithe (one-tenth of all of his possessions) to a certain man named Melchizedek, who was both a king and a priest.

Later the practice of tithing was formally instituted as part of the Mosaic Law. It is specifically mentioned in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The story of the institution of tithing is complex and interesting. Under the Mosaic Law the tithe was collected at various times and for various purposes. In simple terms, it was used for three main purposes: (1) to support the Levites, (2) to care for the poor, and (3) to provide for public celebrations.

Under the Mosaic Law, the tithe was administered like a tax, in the sense that the tithe was obligatory, not optional. Quite simply, a person could not be in right standing with Jehovah, the God of Israel, if he violated the tithing requirements.

As nearly as scholars can tell, the people of Israel did not do a very good job of tithing for much of their history. Time and again
they ignored the requirement to tithe. The evidence of this is seen in the way the prophets repeatedly castigated the people for not paying their tithes. Malachi is famous for his question: “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How are we robbing thee?’ In your tithes and offerings.” (Malachi 3:8) Without the tithe, the community storehouses feel empty, and when the storehouses were empty, the poor went hungry.

**The New Covenant:**

What does stewardship look like in the new convent, the New Testament?

The New Testament says virtually nothing about tithing. It is neither obligatory as a form of tax as it was under the Mosaic Law, nor is it a requirement for right standing before God. St. Paul makes it clear that our standing before God is not a function of what we do, including tithing, but a function of God’s grace.

Now let us return to the Corinthian correspondence and see what Paul says about stewardship and the principle of generosity.

These passages refer to a collection that was being planned for the church in Jerusalem. The collection was meant to do two things: (1) to bring relief to the church in Jerusalem which was suffering great poverty, and (2) to show unity between the church in Jerusalem and its relatively well-to-do, urban, largely Gentile churches in the Diaspora.
1 Corinthians 16
Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

NOTE: regular giving; accountability

2 Corinthians 8
We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace (charis, used 10 times in the next two chapters) of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

2 Corinthians 9
Now it is not necessary for me to write to you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not
ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. *

5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

6 The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, ‘He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness* endures for ever.’

10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. * 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; 12 for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. 13 Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, 14 while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. 15 Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Note the words that attest to the rich theological significance that Paul attaches to the collection.

charis: grace, privilege, generous undertaking, generous act, thanks, blessing

Other important words: bountiful gift (9:5); voluntary gift (9:6, twice); ministry (9:12); sharing (koinonia 8:4; 9:13)
Our Response:

Some of us may not feel particularly generous.
- People are not born generous. They are born with the capacity for generosity, but they are not born generous.
- So, the solution to not feeling generous is to make deliberate decisions to behave more generously.
- Generosity is partly a deliberate choice to behave in a certain way and partly a feeling that accompanies the choice when we have practiced it for a while.

Some of us may want to be generous, but find it difficult. After all, these are difficult times, and we see the necessity and value of living frugally. How does generosity fit into that equation?
- Interestingly, this situation is very much parallel to the one to which Paul wrote (II Cor. 8:1, 2) when he described the Macedonians.

- Experience may have taught us hard lessons. My grandfather was like that. He was a child of great poverty.

- The example of the Macedonians is inspiring. They gave out of their “severe ordeal of affliction;” “their extreme poverty … overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” (II Cor. 8:3,4)

- Paul’s instructions are also helpful: the road to generosity involves planning ahead, setting aside small amounts on a regular basis; begin disciplined; and trusting that God will provide.

- My parents exhibited a different example. They were people who learned the joy of giving generously.
In the end, if we want to become generous, I think we have to allow the Holy Spirit to work at two places in our lives.

1. The Heart: We have to allow ourselves to be touched by the things that touch the heart of God. Indifferent people are not generous people.
2. We have to deliberately choose the path of generosity. Generosity is a virtue, a good habit. The habits that we call virtues are not formed by coincidence. Nor they formed against our better judgment. They are formed with our consent and as a result of our deliberate choices.

Closing Prayer: Lord may we allow ourselves to be touched by the things that touch your heart. May we also choose to exercise stewardship of your resources in ways that both meet the needs of those to whom you have called us and nurture in us the virtue of generosity.