



RADICAL GENEROSITY

Discussion Guide

It's characterized by abundance: 2 Corinthians 9.6-15

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- o Describe a time when someone was generous with you. What impact did it make on you?
- o Optional: What from the sermon, if anything, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

Setting the Stage: *Giving just isn't natural, at least cheerful giving isn't. Giving through clenched teeth and fists, that's more the reality. While God may love a cheerful giver, cheerful givers are hard to come by these days. While giving cheerfully may be difficult, what if becoming a cheerful giver wasn't? What if developing a generous spirit was actually quite simple? Maybe then the question wouldn't be where can we find a cheerful giver, but who might be willing to become one?*

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read 2 Corinthians 9.6-15 (*You may wish to read 2 Corinthians 8.1-9.5 for context.*)
- According to Paul, what are the outcomes of a generous spirit?
- In your opinion, why is Paul concerned about the Corinthians having a generous spirit?
- Paul describes the path to developing a generous spirit as one marked by grace (2 Cor. 9.8). How is this like or unlike means you might recommend for developing a generous spirit? What does this say about Paul's understanding of transformation of the heart? (Note: *Read the notes on this passage for additional information.*)
- Do you think people give generously today? Can you explain?
- What might happen if people did give generously?
- What do you think generous giving consists of? Is this type of giving easy or difficult for you? Can you elaborate?
- Have you ever attempted to develop a generous spirit? What did you try? How did it work?
- What would it look like for you to open yourself to God's grace in order to develop a spirit of generosity?
- What steps might you be willing to take to move toward opening yourself in this way?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- o Prayer requests
- o Group prayer time
- o House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)

Group Notes

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Context and Background

Paul's Collection: In reading the letters of Paul, one will notice several themes that rise to the top. While some of these are theological, one is highly practical, the collection of funds for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This is so important to Paul that it appears across several of his letters (Gal. 2; Rom. 15; 1 Cor. 16; and 2 Cor. 8-9). Paul encouraged his churches to collect money for the support of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who had fallen into poverty and need. While practical in nature, Paul also seemed to have had in mind the hope that this collection would give his churches legitimacy in the eyes of Jewish Christians who questioned his "law free" gospel message (Acts 21.17-26). Paul viewed the collection as a means of demonstrating that Gentile believers shared in the same spiritual blessings as Jewish believers (Rom. 15.23-29). While most of his churches seem to have willingly engaged in this collection ministry, Corinth appears to have been a different story. Paul was the founding pastor of the Corinthian church (Acts 18). However, after his departure, tensions arose between Paul and the church, tensions that Paul sought to address in 1 Corinthians. At the end of this letter, Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to set aside money each week for the purpose of sending the funds to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16.1-4). However, the letter does not seem to have been well received, necessitating a "painful visit" by Paul to the church in Corinth (2 Cor. 1.23-2.4). After this visit, Paul wrote a second letter seeking reconciliation and further correction in the Corinthian congregation. In this letter, Paul reminded the Corinthians of his call to take up a collection. He told them that the Macedonian churches had given freely and that Titus would soon be arriving to gather the funds they had collected. However, Paul seems unsure of the completion of the project (2 Cor. 8.1-15). Therefore, Paul writes to encourage them to complete the collection before Titus' arrival, lest he and they be ashamed by their lack of diligence (2 Cor. 8.16-9.5). What seems to be the real issue is not Paul's ability to compel the collection but the spirit in which the collection is gathered. Paul wants to engender a spirit of giving rather than wrenching money from their hands. Therefore, Paul concludes his discussion of the collection by encouraging a generous spirit, reminding the Corinthians that God desires and supports a generous spirit among His people (2 Cor. 9.6-15).

Grace: We typically define grace as God's unmerited work of redemption through Jesus' life and work on the cross. Defined in this way, grace is something a person experiences in a punctiliar way. That is, one receives "grace" and then becomes "saved." However, the view of grace in the NT is much wider than this. Grace in the NT can be defined as God's power available to His people which enables them to do what they could not otherwise do on their own. Defined in this manner, grace is the substance that flows into and sustains a follower of Jesus, enabling and transforming them to live the life of Christ. It is this wider definition of grace that Paul uses in 2 Cor. 9. It is God's grace that flows into the life of a believer enabling them to give generously, something they otherwise would not be able to do (2 Cor. 9.8, 14-15).

The Text

Truths about a generous spirit (2 Cor. 9.6-7): Because Paul is concerned with the spirit in which the Corinthian church takes up the collection (*See Paul's Collection*), he moves to address how one might develop a generous spirit. He begins by arguing that a generous spirit is desirable for Christ followers. He does this by referencing scripture from the Old Testament. First, Paul quotes an agricultural proverb. Only in sowing generously will a farmer reap generously. A farmer who is stingy with his seed cannot expect a large harvest. Here Paul may be alluding to Proverbs 11.24-25. He is not making a promise that generous giving is an investment for a greater return. What he is arguing is that in life, positive results are not seen when one is stingy. Second, Paul states that in giving, one should do so with the right spirit. To give out of compulsion is not pleasing to God. Rather, God desires people to give cheerfully and willingly. Here Paul quotes Proverbs 22.8(9) from the Greek version of the OT (LXX), a passage not found in the Hebrew texts. His point seems to be that in regard to the collection, positive results will only come if the Corinthian church has their heart straight. Attitude of the heart matters, both in results and to God.

Fostering a generous spirit (2 Cor. 9.8-11): A generous spirit is not natural to fallen humanity, nor is it something that can be willed into existence. The Corinthian church cannot simply decide to be generous. Therefore, Paul outlines a path toward generosity. It is the path of grace (*See Grace*). Verse 8 literally reads, "God is able to abundantly supply all grace to you, so that in all things all the time you will have more than enough for every good work." The basic idea is that God is willing and able to give the Corinthians His grace, His power, so that they might have a change of heart. They may realize that they have more than enough so that they might engage in the good work of the collection. He quotes Psalm 112.9, a verse from a psalm about those who fear God. He uses this verse as a supporting text indicating what God can do in and through the lives of those who are open to Him. God is the ultimate supplier of seed and food. As such, God can give the Corinthians what they need physically and spiritually. He can grow them through His grace so that they can give generously, an act that in turn will lead to thanksgiving among the recipients.

Results of a generous spirit: When God's people open their lives to His grace, in this case to develop a generous spirit, then God is glorified. The act of service of taking up the collection, assuming a transformed heart, will demonstrate that the Corinthians have heeded the gospel, the message not only of salvation but of transformation. This sharing will thus lead to praise for God. It will also lead to prayers on behalf of the Corinthians. These prayers are the response to the grace at work in the lives of the Corinthians (Literally: "And their yearning for you in prayer will be because of the super abundant grace of God in you"). God's grace not only changes hearts, it leads to worship. Thus, Paul gives thanks for the indescribable gift of God, that is His gift of grace.

Application: Giving is not natural, at least cheerful giving isn't. We might give, but it will be begrudgingly, out of guilt, or possibly fear. God may love a cheerful giver, but a cheerful giver is hard to find. However, a cheerful giver is not hard to develop. God's people can become cheerful givers, not by deciding or willing this attitude, but by opening their lives to God's grace. It is God's grace that will remake their hearts, leading them to action that ripples into praise in the lives of others. In opening one's heart to God's grace, one opens their life to positive and ongoing results for God's Kingdom. The question is not what can a generous spirit accomplish but what person will open their heart to God's grace to become generous in spirit?