

The context of scripture shows us that God makes us new creations, and we are created for community- specifically the Church- so that we can engage and redeem the world. But in the world and it's different cultural contexts, culture pushes back with it's perspectives and paradigms. There will always be this tension when we're called to be in the world but not of it.

With this reality, it's helpful to remember that the Bible comes out of history and cultures within it's history. And not just the narrative bits, but even Paul's letters to the church in the NT.

These were real churches full of real people in real cities.

Ephesians – last week we looked at the Church in Ephesus.

Corinthians – tonight we look at the Church in Corinth.

In 143 BC the thriving Greek city-state was destroyed by Rome, and it lay in ruins for a century. But Julius Caesar recognized it's valuable location for both trade and travel by both sea and land, and rebuilt it as a prominent city. Being a new city it held the door open for all kinds of economic and social opportunities, so it became the hub for people looking to advance themselves and climb the ladder of upward mobility. Corinth became a free-wheeling “boom town” not unlike the old American frontier. Their “Corinthian Dream” wasn't much unlike the “American Dream,” and their cultural materialism became much like ours.

By Paul's day it was the wealthiest city in Greece and a major urban center, and the stereotypical Corinthian identity became known for the crassly materialistic, the self-confident, and the proud.

If we're honest that sounds a lot like... our Western culture.

William Dyrness addresses the effects of American culture in his book How Does America Hear the Gospel and says:

“In many respects American identity is established in material terms. We define ourselves by our relation to our material environment, perhaps more than our relation to other people (or even to God). That this has resulted in great material prosperity and great technological accomplishment we can readily acknowledge. But we [note] a dark side as well: Americans invariably tend to endow material means with ultimate or final value. Owning a home, for example, is seen as one of the ends of life rather than as a means to other ends. Meaning is attached to accumulation [& consuming].”

We live in a consumer culture. This effects our perspectives and ways of thinking.

“We define ourselves in relation to our material environment”

Our consumer culture pulls on us, even in the Church, defining and identifying us by our relation to our material environment. The call to a life of giving generously challenges our consumer culture directly, and it's why we skirt the issue quickly- even in the Church.

Paul dives right into the subject with little hesitation in **2 Corinthians 8:1-15**

In 2 Corinthians Paul defends his apostleship and then focuses on reconciliation with the repentant Corinthians, and looking at the expectations and the fruit of the repentant he

immediately shifts in chapter 8 to giving money toward relief for the Church effected by famine in Jerusalem...

It's such a hard turn in subject matter that some folks who study the Bible have contended that it was a later addition to the letter. But the question we should ask is should anyone be surprised that Paul ties together a repentant heart and giving, our faith and our finances?

John the Baptist in Luke 3 is asked by three different groups what they should do to bear the fruit of repentance. His three answers?

- 1.) Everyone should share clothes and food with the poor (vs 11)
- 2.) Tax collectors shouldn't pocket extra money (vs 13)
- 3.) Soldiers should be content with their wages and not extort money (vs 14)

Each answer has to do with money and material things.

Nobody asked John a thing about their possessions. Why would he go there?

Jesus began his very ministry with the words "**Repent** for the Kingdom of Heaven is near" and went on to spend about 20% of his recorded teachings on money and material things.

Paul has twice the reason to dive into generosity because he as well as the Church had the full life of Christ as reference. He makes reference to it in vs. 9 of our passage:

"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich."

At the heart of the Gospel is a heart of generosity.

You might say, "What does my finances have to do with my faith?"

It has everything to do with your faith.

If you believe Jesus is generous, you should be generous.

At the heart of a consumer is the desire to receive.

At the heart of the Gospel is God's desire to give.

To be a Christian is to step into more and more generosity.

To step from a perspective of getting to a perspective of giving.

To step from being served to serving.

To step from consuming to contributing.

So as hard as we may try to divorce our faith and our finances, they have an inseparable relationship. There's a fundamental connection to spiritual lives and what we do with our material things.

Yet we are so often blinded to it. Jesus tells us in his sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:22):

"The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness."

So we take the verse and apply it to sins of the eye, lust and alike.

But this passage sits between discussions on money & possessions.

Both in Matthew and Luke. After more discussion on material things he says in Luke 12,

"WATCH OUT! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed."

Jesus says **WATCH OUT** about money and greed because it hides itself.

Materialism blinds you to materialism.

Common confessions: lust, lying, anger... nobody has confessed: *"hey I'm greedy"*

That's why Paul closes his second letter to the Church amidst the wealth and materialism of Corinth by saying test yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test your blind spots.

Paul gives us a checkup in 2 Corinthians 8 for generosity.

"I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches."

If it's not a command... it's ironic he says in verse 11: *"Now finish the work..."*

Is he contradicting himself? I subscribe to the stance based on his other writing that Paul's point is that it is not a direct command from Christ, but it is an imperative that he gives as an apostle.

To Paul this is clear, as it was for John the Baptist and Jesus himself- if we experience God's generous grace, we will walk in generosity.

It's as simple as that.

This opportunity to give for the church in Corinth was a TEST to show that they were walking in this generous grace.

We too have a similar test.

4 questions on the test that we can pull from Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 8:

Am I surrendered?

8:1 – *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches*

It is a work of grace – what verse 9 calls the “generous grace of Jesus Christ”

Thrice's song “Beggars”:

*You big shots who swagger and stride with conceit, did you devise how your frame would be formed? If you'd be raised in a palace or left out on the streets? Or Choose the place or the hour you'd be born? Tell me what can you claim? Not a thing. Not your name. Tell me if you can recall just one thing that's not a gift in this life - **can you see now that everything's grace after all?***

A perspective that sees everything as grace is a game changer.

Often our focus with grace the reality that it covers our sin. We're given mercy and forgiveness.

But maybe the question shouldn't end at **what is grace?**

We should continue with **what isn't grace?**

In our consumer, materialistic culture where we identify with our material possessions, the temptation is to take credit for our giving rather than giving God praise for making it possible.

Giving isn't our way of showing God what we can do for Him.

It's our way of highlighting all that God has graciously done for us.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

Every faculty you have, your power of thinking or of moving your limbs from moment to moment, is given you by God. If you devoted every moment of your whole life exclusively to His service, you could not give Him anything that was not in a sense His own already.

Praise God that He gives grace that covers our sin.

But as Paul also says in **Acts 17:25** our God is so gracious that He also “gives everyone life and breath and all things.” Everything we have is a product of grace.

Why is this so key?

We like that grace deals with our sin when it comes to piling our sin on Christ and the cross.

But when God asks us to be generous with those things He’s given us by grace? We squirm.

A follow up question on our test would be:

How can I justify rushing to give God my sin

but drag my feet when it comes to giving Him back what He’s graced me with?

Talk about giving and especially tithing and the Q’s that commonly come up-

Is it even still required? Didn’t it go the way of not trimming your beard and avoiding BBQ?

Should I tithe gross or net? Does God expect me to tithe when I’m struggling? I tithe my time to the church, isn’t that enough?

All these questions miss the point.

They ask what’s the least, most basic measure I can give and still be blessed?

Biblical generosity is the same as the rest of our Christian walk. God doesn’t want 10%. He wants it ALL. It’s about total surrender to an ALL-powerful, ALL-loving God.

A God who created ALL things and graces us with ALL we have. A God who gave ALL he had at the cross. Jesus didn’t die to take away 10% of our sin. He died for ALL of it.

The song isn’t entitled “I surrender 10%”, it’s called “I surrender all.”

Am I living surrendered?

Randy Alcorn – ***“Giving affirms Christ’s lordship. It dethrones me and exalts Him.”***

You can’t divorce finances and faith.

And if you don’t address finances in your marriage, you can head toward divorce.

It’s the #1 source of conflict in marriage. My premarital counseling includes a focus on finances.

A perspective to adopt: **I OWN NOTHING. (we own nothing)**

It all belongs to God. I’m his steward.

What does that mean?

Your money, time, energy, resources talents and gifts weren’t given to terminate on themselves, they’re given to be used for the glory of God.

Am I content?

The other side of the I own nothing coin is this reality... **I HAVE EVERYTHING.**

In comparison to the rest of the world, we've got it so good in terms of having what we need.

Sub-question: even if we didn't - would we be content with Christ?

Or is our source of contentment our material things?

Is God your source of security? Or is your savings?

The one that serves as your source is your true object of worship.

It's why Paul uses generosity and giving as a test for the Church in Corinth.

Paul uses the church in Macedonia as a contrast to the church in Corinth on giving.

While the Corinthians dragged their feet to give, the church in Macedonia jumped at it.

Why is this significant? The church in Macedonia lived in- "*severe trials and extreme poverty.*"

The goal isn't to wait until you have a certain amount to step into giving and generosity.

The Macedonians certainly didn't.

It's not a matter of provision. It's a matter of priority.

It's a matter of response to God's grace.

"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich."

How do we know if we're doing it out of love? A good check is our third question on the test...

Am I joyful?

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

Again – poverty didn't rob them of generosity.

Paul's primary concern isn't the budget or number, it's their heart – the fruit of grace in the life of the believers.

Paul uses 6 different Greek words for the offering itself:

Logeia – collection

Eulogia – blessing

Leitourgia – priestly service

Koinonia – fellowship, partnership

Diakonia – service, ministry

Charis – grace

Giving has a multitude of meanings in the life of the believer, yet not one of these words have to do explicitly with money. They do have to do with our heart and worship.

Paul's primary concern is clearly not a monetary amount.

It's the condition of their hearts.

The Macedonians joy wasn't in their circumstance. They were in severe affliction and extreme poverty! Their joy was in God and his grace.

Am I expectant?

“they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people”

The Macedonians- these people who had nothing- BEGGED to give!
What a contrast to our culture where we often look for excuses to bow out.
They were eager and expectant.

Why? Maybe you’ve heard it said: you can’t out-give God. It’s true.
But in our materialistic culture we can look for blessings in material things.
If the thought that immediately comes to mind when you think of blessings is material things,
you’re missing the point.
Our ultimate expectations shouldn’t be for this life, but the next. Eternity.

Jesus tells us to store up treasures in Heaven. It’s not some transfer of treasures to Heaven. It’s
not transferring treasure, but seeking a new one altogether. Giving is an exercise in recognizing
that material things cannot compare to eternal things.

Jesus isn’t against planning for the future. Storing treasure is a command.
He doesn’t tell us to store up for retirement or 30 years down the road.
He tells us to store up for eternity – a million years down the road!

Giving is an exercise in recognizing that material things cannot compare to eternal things.

If you don’t see everything- now and forever- as a gift of God’s grace, may that shift tonight.
And if you do see everything as a gift of God’s grace, may you see that we aren’t called to just
consume it, we’re also called to contribute it.

Paul is proposing a transition for any culture of consumerism that worships wealth:

Don’t love your money.

Love with your money.

A great way to shake loose of the love of money? *Love WITH your money.* Live generously.

When you’re a baby somebody feeds you.
When you mature you feed yourself and feed others.
It should be the same as we mature as believers.
To grow in God’s generous grace is to grow in generosity.

Consumer culture – serve me.

Church culture – Don’t come to be served, but TO serve.

- Don’t just come to consume. Contribute.

Paul doesn’t give us an explicit standard FOR giving.

But he does explicitly give us the standard OF giving.

(if you look at the OT, 10% was the starting point for the tithe, the same tithe Jesus tells us in the Gospels to not neglect... add up other annual contributions and it was closer to 30%)

Start somewhere.

We'll end this week where we started last week.

Jesus said – ***“I will build MY church”***

We're called to find belief in Christ, and belonging in his church.

Communion and community. Faith and fellowship. To the point we'd feel ownership to say of some place of worship – “this is my church.”

Some would say I give to charity or here and there to causes.

I'd say that's because you lack a church where you feel ownership.

God has a church for you.

Get rooted. Get active. And sow.

That's how Christ builds his Church.

Matthew 6:33 – seek first the kingdom of God...

What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with getting, so you can respond to God's giving... Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions.

Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

(MSG)