

Sermon #225
October 29, 2017
2 Corinthians 8:1-7

The Generous Life

His family thinks he's gone crazy mad. But Zell Kravinsky thinks otherwise. He's a millionaire who also gives millions to charities and health organizations. Born of Jewish parents, Zell lives near Philadelphia with his wife and four children. He amassed his millions in the real estate business, but he didn't hang on to it all. He started by giving the biblical tithe of 10%, but then moved on to 20%, the rabbinical guide. But then he began giving away almost all of his fortune, a whopping \$45 million. A friend explained his actions, "He gave away the money because he had it and there were people who needed it. But then it began to change the way he looked at himself."

Kravinsky read an article in the Wall Street Journal and began to investigate the possibility of donating his own kidney to a complete stranger on a waiting list. In the article, He read there were more than 60,000 people in the U.S waiting for a kidney transplant with only about 15,000 to 20,000 potential donors. His wife and parents objected strongly, warning him that he was a family man with a wife and family to care for. But that did not discourage Kravinsky. He learned that many African-Americans have difficulty obtaining kidneys from family members, so he donated one of his kidneys to a lower-income, twenty-nine-year-old black woman who was studying for a degree in social work and had been undergoing dialysis for the last eight years. Kravinsky also encourages other people to do the same thing. He is truly a man who lives the generous life, even if his close friends and family think he's gone crazy.

There are many stories in the Bible about generosity: from Abraham in Gen. 14 who gave a tenth of all his resources to Melchizedek, King of Salem; to King David who insisted on paying for his sacrifices so that he would not sacrifice anything to God that cost him nothing (2 Sam. 24:24); to the story of Ruth, who was willing to give up all to follow Naomi and her God to a foreign land where she knew no one (Ruth 1); or finally the widow who put in a small mite into the offerings, which amounted to all she had (Luke 21:1-4). But perhaps one of the most amazing examples involving a generous group of people is found in 2 Cor. 8, that we read earlier. In this chapter Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to give to the needy Christians in Jerusalem. In doing so, he highlights the example of the Macedonian Churches who gave even beyond their means. They were a powerful example of extravagant generosity.

Today is the last Sunday in this series of sermons on The Five Fruitful Practices by Bishop Robert Schnase. Let's recount the first four: 1.) radical hospitality, 2.) passionate worship, 3.) intentional faith development, 4.) risk-taking mission and service, and today 5.) extravagant generosity (youth poster). This theme is significant as it helps us transition from this series into a season of thanksgiving and gratitude in November. But it's also significant in that it is paramount to our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ. What do we need to learn or remember about this generous life?

1. Giving is an act of grace.

Paul begins this passage by saying, “*Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches*” (v. 1). The Macedonian churches were located much further north of the city of Corinth. They included churches such as Berea, Thessalonica, and Philippi. They weren’t wealthy churches by any means. But the focus of the generous life doesn’t start with them, but rather with God and his grace.

It’s interesting that Paul uses the word grace three times in these seven verses we read and ten times in chapters 8 and 9 when he teaches about the generous life. The word in Greek for grace is (*Charis*), and one of the ways to translate this word in this context refers to divine generosity or divine enablement to participate in this worthy offering. So, God gave them the grace to give. He enabled them. Thus, no one receives full credit because all the glory and credit belongs to God. God’s grace begins all good works. It’s like the motivation that someone needs to build a house, or paint a picture, or write a song. As a song writer, I know well that one must have inspiration to compose a song. So, it is with giving, grace is required, and giving is a part of grace. As God gave them the grace to give, so he does for us today as well. All our generous acts begin with God’s grace, which leads to the joy of giving.

2. Giving is a privilege.

The Macedonian churches portray that type of grace given to them, because they gave in very difficult times. Paul goes on to say in verse 2, “*In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. And they gave “even beyond their ability”* (v. 3).

They didn’t wait to give until their bank accounts were healthy or the stock market was increasing. They gave when things weren’t going well. And they didn’t worry about what they didn’t have because they knew it was a privilege to give. They even urgently pleaded with Paul for “*the privilege of sharing*” in this service to the needy Christians in Jerusalem. They considered it a privilege to give and not a chore or a rigid requirement. As Paul would later say in chapter 9, they gave with cheerful hearts not reluctantly or under compulsion (v. 7). And the word in Greek translated as privilege is also the word *Charis* meaning grace. The privilege of sharing is grace.

Two years ago, our church needed a new boiler system, costing thousands of dollars. I’m thankful that God used your donations to help pay for that much-needed repair. But during that time, we didn’t stop giving to missions or the food pantry or Red Bird Mission or Wonderful Wednesday meals. We kept giving. And we kept giving to the ongoing ministry of this church and its important outreach to this community. That’s because giving is a privilege. It’s a joy to give.

(Transition: Yes, giving is an act of grace that begins with God and it is a privilege to give and not a chore. And as cheerful givers we begin to truly mature in our faith.)

3. Giving in grace is a way to excel in the Christian life.

Paul went on in verse 7 to refer to the ways the Corinthian Church was excelling. And after reading his first scathing letter to a divisive church (1st Corinthians), it's exciting to see that they are excelling in many things now. So, he says, "*But since you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving*" (v. 7). There's that word grace again – this grace of giving. A church can excel in many ways, and the generous life includes everything, but it must not forget the grace of giving.

What does it mean to really excel in something? I remember in basketball in High School, we would often talk about bringing our A game to excel or do our very best to win. Or we would also hear the coach say, "Give 110%," whatever that meant exactly, we knew it meant to do the little extra to win – chase after loose balls on the floor, keep our opponent away from the hoop, and keep running the court, among many other things. Well, Paul says to excel, or do the little extra in the grace of giving. The Greek Word for excel here means to increase or abound, or overflow with generosity.

I am thankful for the ways that I see this church overflowing or abounding in generosity. You have taught me about generosity and I'm thankful. Rachel and I do tithe our income and often give beyond that as well to other projects or needs. We give to missions and we also support a child through Compassion International, something beyond what we do for the church. Some of you have taken the 2% challenge each year. You weren't quite ready to give a tenth, but you started increasing your giving by 2%. The challenge this year is to take that leap of faith and increase it another 2% if you are not to 10% yet, but this is all as God leads you.

This morning I have asked Darrel Shern to come and share with us a little about how God is using and challenging him in the area of generous giving and how God is providing. As he comes forward, I'll let you know that Darrell has now been following Jesus for five years now and during that time he has been faithfully active in our church ever Wednesday and Sunday during those five years. Darrell, come and share with us.

(Darrell's story: He now gives to God through his church the \$100 a month he used to spend on cigarettes.)

Conclusion

Thank you so much, Darrell. We thank God for what he is doing in your life. And we are grateful that Zell Kravinsky is not crazy, but just very generous, loving, and caring. You don't have to give away millions though to be like Mr. Kravinsky. You just give or share what you have and what God calls you to do, because that's an act of grace. And it's a privilege to excel in the grace of giving. Extravagant generosity begins with each of us in our church and beyond. And it does take all of us being generous together, like the Macedonian Churches. Will you be a generous giver?