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GENEROUS AND HOSPITABLE

Romans 12:13

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Romans Lesson 85

Generous and Hospitable Romans 12:13

As I mentioned last week, Paul's three words in verse 12, "devoted to prayer" are likely to raise the guilt level for most of us, because we know that our prayer lives are inadequate. But then he has the nerve to follow that up with another topic that produces more guilt, namely, giving (Rom. 12:13): "contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality." Paul is calling us to generosity and hospitality, which also includes sharing our resources.

But as we consider this touchy subject, let me remind you again that Paul is not motivating us by guilt. His commands in this section are based on Romans 12:1-2, which is the logical conclusion of chapters 1-11. Paul is saying that if you have experienced God's many mercies in Christ, then it is only reasonable that you give yourself totally to Him and live in a manner that is pleasing to Him. God's mercy and grace are the motivation to surrender all to Christ, including our money and possessions.

Paul uses the same logic in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." In the context, Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to be generous toward the poor believers in Jerusalem. The appeal is: Christ's grace in giving Himself for us on the cross when we were spiritually helpless and destitute should motivate us to be generous to those in need. And the bottom line, as always, is that our generosity would glorify the generous God who gave His own Son for us. So in verse 13 Paul is saying,

The mercies of God call us to be generous and hospitable.

It is estimated that 15 percent of everything Jesus said (as recorded in the gospels) relates to money or possessions. He said more about money than about heaven and hell combined (Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* [Multnomah Publishers], p. 8). As Alcorn says so well (p. 73), "God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving." Ouch!

Jesus taught that how we handle money is the litmus test of our faith in Him. He said (Luke 16:10), "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much." That verse is often used to say that if we're faithful in some insignificant job, then we'll get promoted to more important jobs. While that may be true, that application overlooks the fact that in the context, the "very little thing" is money, while the "much" refers to things of eternal value. It's quite ironic that the thing that for us is a very big deal (money) Jesus calls a very little thing! Jesus is saying that if we're faithful stewards of the money that He entrusts to us, then we'll be faithful with the things that really matter, namely, eternal riches.

So the question we all must ask ourselves is, am I treasuring stuff and laying up treasures of stuff on earth, or am I treasuring Christ and laying up treasures in heaven by generously giving to promote His kingdom purposes?

1. The mercies of God call us to be generous toward the saints.

Romans 12:13a, "contributing to the needs of the saints." "Contributing" (Rom. 12:13) is the familiar Greek verb, *koinoneo*, often translated as "fellowshipping" or "sharing together." It (and related nouns) is used in reference to sharing material goods in several other places (Acts 2:44; 4:32; Rom. 15:27; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:15; 1 Tim. 6:18; Heb. 13:16). "Saints" refers, of course, to fellow believers. It could refer to the poor (such as Paul's efforts to collect funds for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, 2 Cor. 8 & 9), or to Christian workers who needed support (1 Cor. 9:4-18; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). By mentioning the saints, Paul is not denying the need to help unbelievers, but rather emphasizing that our priority should be towards fellow Christians (Gal. 6:10).

First I want to give you some guidelines to help evaluate your own generosity. Second, we will look at how to grow in generosity. Then we'll look briefly at how to determine to whom you should give.

SOME GUIDELINES TO HELP EVALUATE YOUR GENEROSITY:

Generosity is a lifestyle that flows out of an attitude. It's a bit difficult to define, since there is a subjective element in generosity.

Webster says that it refers to liberality in giving. But what seems generous to one person may seem stingy to another. Also, we don't know whether a person is giving sacrificially or out of an overflow of abundance. So what may look to us like a stingy gift may actually be quite generous if the giver is poor, or what may look to us like a generous gift may be stingy if the giver is wealthy. So we should not judge others, but seek to please God with our giving and let Him be the judge of others. Here are four guidelines to use in evaluating your own generosity:

- (1) A generous person has received God's generous mercy in Christ and it overflows in generosity toward others.

This gets at our heart motives for giving. There are a lot of wrong motives for giving: pride; the desire for power; guilt; greed (the thought that if I give, God will give back to me far more); pressure; or, responding to gimmicks. The right motive for giving is that God has mercifully, generously given me eternal life through the sacrifice of His own Son. In response, out of a desire to please God and glorify Him by reflecting His generous nature to others, I give. So ask yourself, "Does my life help others to see that my Heavenly Father is generous?"

- (2) A generous person gives cheerfully and thankfully, not grudgingly or under compulsion.

Paul puts it this way (2 Cor. 9:7): "Each one *must do* just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Generosity is closely tied in with a cheerful, thankful attitude. If it takes pressure tactics or guilt to get you to give, you're probably not giving generously. Ask yourself, "Do I give cheerfully with thankfulness to God for His unspeakable gift to me?"

- (3) A generous person gives prayerfully, systematically, and faithfully, not impulsively or sporadically.

As we just read, biblical givers "purpose in their hearts." They plan to give. As Paul wrote (1 Cor. 16:2), "On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come." He wanted the believers to be thoughtful, systematic, and disciplined with their giving. Impulsive, sporadic giving is usually not generous. Often it is a

response to alleviate guilt. So ask yourself, "Do I give prayerfully, systematically, and faithfully, or only impulsively and sporadically?"

- (4) A generous person gives as the Lord has prospered him, with his sights on eternity.

I think that it's a significant silence that Paul never wrote to Gentile churches to explain the need to tithe. (See my message, "Why You Should Not Tithe," on the church web site.) Rather, the standard is, "as he may prosper." If the Lord has prospered you so that you have enough to provide for your family, then don't use the extra to buy more and nicer stuff. Use it to give generously to the Lord's work or to genuinely needy saints.

The reason a generous person does this is that he realizes that whatever he lays up on earth will be lost, but whatever he lays up in heaven will be his eternally. As Jesus said (Matt. 6:19-21), "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Randy Alcorn (*ibid.*, p. 13, italics his) comments, "But when Jesus warns us not to store up treasures on earth, it's not just because wealth *might* be lost; it's because wealth will *always* be lost. Either it leaves us while we live, or we leave it when we die. No exceptions." So ask, "As God prospers me more, do I look for ways to give more or to spend more? Is my aim to collect more stuff here or to invest in that which lasts for eternity?"

HOW TO GROW IN GENEROSITY:

Let me suggest five ways:

- (1) Yield all of your money and possessions to the Lord (who already owns them) and then manage them in light of His kingdom purposes.

God owns the world and all that is in it (Ps. 24:1; 50:10-12). He has entrusted each of us with a certain amount to use for His purposes until He returns, when we will give an account (Matt. 25:14-30). Jesus made it clear: You either serve God or Mammon, but not both (Matt. 6:24). So we have to view ourselves as manag-

ers, not as owners, and keep the Owner's objectives in view. Since His aim is to glorify Himself by having disciples from every people group before His throne in glory, we need to use His resources in view of that goal. To keep Mammon from its gradual encroachment, I need to constantly reaffirm God as the owner of all.

(2) Get a job and work hard to earn so that you can give.

The American dream is to get a good-paying job so that you can pile up money and stuff for your own pleasure. But God's way, as Alcorn put it, is, "God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving." Paul gives this instruction (Eph. 4:28), "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need." A thief who merely stops stealing hasn't dealt with the laziness and greed that led him to steal. To deal with laziness and greed, the former thief needs to work so as to have extra to give to those in need.

Your primary responsibility is to provide for your own needs and those of your family. Paul didn't mince words when he said (1 Tim. 5:8), "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Even unbelievers work to provide for their own families. Believers should not do less. But once your family's needs are met, you should think and pray about how the Lord may want you to invest it for eternity, rather than to run out and buy more stuff.

(3) Begin a lifelong war against greed.

Paul equated greed with idolatry (Col. 3:5), which is not a minor sin! Jesus warned (Luke 12:15), "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." All of the ads that constantly bombard us are designed to feed our greed. The advertisers want us to think that we can't be happy unless we buy their product. But even after we've got their stuff, there is always something else.

The opposite of greed is contentment. Hebrews 13:5 exhorts, "*Make sure that* your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, 'I will never

desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.” Paul said (1 Tim. 6:8), “If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.” Then he went on to warn (1 Tim. 6:9-10), “But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” So a major part of fighting greed is to find contentment in Christ, not in stuff.

- (4) Get out of debt, live frugally, and establish a savings buffer.

Debt goes hand in hand with greed, because it feeds off greed by giving us what we want now, rather than making us wait for it or work for it in advance. Debt almost always reflects impulsiveness, which is the opposite of self-control, a fruit of the Spirit. It usually reflects mismanagement and irresponsibility, which are not the marks of a good manager.

You can't be generous in giving if you're in debt. You need to develop a plan to pay off your creditors, live carefully within your means, and have a savings account to provide for upcoming bills and unforeseen emergencies. This requires discipline, of course. But you won't get out of debt unless you spend less than you earn. And you won't be free to be generous if you don't get out of debt.

- (5) Give faithfully, generously, and regularly off the top of each paycheck.

If you wait to give until you see how much you have left over after everything else, you won't give generously, if at all. So plan how much the Lord wants you to give and give it off the top, before you spend it.

How much should you give? If the tithe was the standard under the Law, it would seem that under grace we should give more, not less than ten percent. We used to give ten percent until early in my ministry, I made the “mistake” of preaching a sermon series on the Christian and money! Since then, we've been able to give pretty consistently at or slightly above 20 percent of our gross income (before taxes) each year. The New Testament standard is, if the Lord prospers you more, give more.

George Muller, whom I mentioned last week as a great example for prayer, was also an example for giving. In 1874, he received for personal income (from donations) 3,100 pounds. That was a tidy sum back then, and he could have lived lavishly. But he and his family lived on 250 pounds (8%) and gave away the rest (92%). From 1870 on, Muller personally fully supported 20 missionaries with the China Inland Mission. Over the years 1831-1885, I calculated that he gave away 86 percent of his income to the Lord's work! God funneled it in the top, but Muller kept the bottom open, never hoarding it or squandering it on personal luxury.

TO WHOM SHOULD I GIVE?

This is a very difficult question to answer! Paul says that we should contribute to the needs of the saints (fellow Christians), but even that is not easy, since the saints may be needy for a number of reasons. Paul does not say to contribute to the *greed* of the saints, but to their *needs*. But a believer may be needy because he has been undisciplined with spending on non-essential or extravagant things. He may be needy because he has been too lazy to work or because he does not work hard on the job and gets fired. To give to alleviate needs due to those reasons would only treat the symptoms, not the cause. But, some are truly needy due to factors beyond their control. They are the ones we should try to help.

Generally, our first responsibility in giving is toward truly needy family members (1 Tim. 5:3-16). To fail here is to be worse than an unbeliever, as we've seen. Next would be to support the local church, which is God's ordained means for evangelism and discipleship. The church should support workers sent out to spread the gospel among those who have not yet heard (3 John 7; 1 Cor. 9:3-14). Beyond that, Christian organizations that preach the gospel and alleviate the needs of the poor are worthy of your help. But do your homework. Make sure you know and agree with the organization's statement of faith, objectives, programs, and methods. Make sure that they are financially accountable.

I've recently read several excellent books on the subject of giving. *When Helping Hurts*, by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert [Moody Publishers] gives many wise and tested insights. For example, the first step in working with the poor is to discern whether the situation calls for relief, rehabilitation, or development (pp. 103-

104). When people come to the church needing funds to alleviate a crisis, they recommend asking four questions (p. 106): First, is there really a crisis at hand? Second, to what degree was the individual personally responsible for the crisis? Have they learned from their mistakes? Third, can the person help himself? Fourth, to what extent has this person already been receiving relief from you or others in the past?

Another excellent book is Jonathan Martin's *Giving Wisely* [Last Chapter Publishing]. He gives four helpful criteria by which to evaluate your giving, whether overseas or here at home. He uses the acronym RAISE (pp. 61-129): Relationship: "A working and viable relationship is the foundation for wise giving." Accountability: Giving to anyone without appropriate accountability is a setup for sin. Indigenous Sustainability: Our giving should not create dependency on long-term outside help. Equity: Our gifts should not create economic inequities in the place it is given.

I would like to see a task force in our church work through these two books and come up with some ways that we can do a better job of contributing to the needs of the saints and helping the poor, whether locally or globally. Keep working at growing in generosity for the glory of God.

2. The mercies of God call us to pursue hospitality.

Romans 12:13b: "practicing hospitality." The word "practicing" is not a helpful translation. It literally is, "pursuing." In fact, it is the word used in the next verse for "persecute." The idea is that we ought to go after or pursue opportunities to show the love of Christ by welcoming people into our homes.

In Paul's day, there were few safe inns and so believers would take in traveling Christians, especially gospel workers (3 John 5-8), in many cases whom they did not know ("hospitality" is literally, "the love of strangers"). Hospitality was enjoined on the entire church (Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:7-9) and was a necessary qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). At the judgment, hospitality will be one mark that we are Jesus' true disciples (Matt. 25:34-35).

One way that you can practice hospitality is to open your home to visiting missionaries. You and your children will be blessed by the experience and you will form a bond that will help

you to pray for the missionary's labors on the field. Another way is if you have room, to take in a student (perhaps an international) for a semester or year. Also, we need everyone at church to keep an eye out for new people in church, to make them feel warmly welcomed and at home. If you're able to do it occasionally, invite a new person home for a meal after church. Don't make a huge fuss over having your house in perfect order, or you'll never get around to hospitality. On the other hand, if your house is a perpetual disaster zone, the first step toward becoming more hospitable might be to get your house in reasonable order.

Conclusion

Here are a few action points:

(1) Do a financial inventory in light of being a manager of God's resources. Are you managing things in light of His kingdom purposes? Are you thinking in terms of biblical priorities when it comes to money and possessions? Are you spending too much on non-essentials in light of eternity? Do you need to get out of debt? Are you giving generously and wisely?

(2) Evaluate how you're doing at hospitality. Are you using your home often as a place to make others feel welcome and accepted? On Sundays, are you focusing on welcoming new people into the church?

(3) Do some reading. In addition to *When Helping Hurts* and *Giving Wisely*, try David Platt's *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* [Multnomah Books]. You may not agree with all of it, but he will make you think! Randy Alcorn's *The Treasure Principle* is a short, provocative, and convicting read. Also, there is a short article by the late Roberta Winter, "The Non-Essentials of Life." We have a few hard copies here or you can read it at: reconciliation.org/pdf/NonEssentials.pdf.

(4) Take the Dave Ramsey Financial Peace University course that we offer here and begin applying his principles.

To glorify our gracious God, we need to be motivated by His mercies to be generous and hospitable.

Application Questions

1. How does a conscientious Christian determine a proper level of living in light of appalling world poverty? Is it wrong to live comfortably while people are starving?
2. How do we determine how much to save towards future needs (kids' education, retirement, etc.)? When does prudent saving cross the line into ungodly hoarding?
3. Is it sin to want a nicer house, furniture, car, etc.? How do we assess such desires in light of 1 Tim. 6:9-10?
4. Which of the four action points (in the conclusion) do you most need to work on? Put in your schedule a time to start.

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