

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 25, 2012**

**LIFE IN THE BODY:
GENEROUS GIVING**

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

I hope you won't mind if I share with you some intercepted correspondence this morning. This is not like a DeAngelo Hall interception for the Redskins. What I've intercepted are some "Dear Pastor" letters written by children. None of these were written to me personally. But they could have been.

Here is one from an eight-year-old boy: "Dear Pastor, I know God loves everybody, but He never met my sister." Maybe some of you can relate to that. Or you could have when you were eight years old.

Or, you might understand the sentiment expressed by another eight-year-old, who writes: "Dear Pastor, I would like to go to heaven someday because I know my brother won't be there."

A ten-year-old girl writes: "Dear Pastor, I'm sorry I can't put more money in the offering plate, but my father didn't give me a raise in my allowance. Could you have a sermon about a raise in my allowance?" Sorry. I could. But I won't.

Another writes: "Dear Pastor, I liked your sermon where you said that good health is more important than money. But I still want a raise in my allowance." If you get a raise in your allowance, child, I hope you can enjoy it in good health.

Here is one more: "Dear Pastor, I liked your sermon on Sunday. Especially when it was finished."

Well. You may feel that way about this sermon. Maybe you will feel relieved when it is finished. I'm okay with that. I'll probably feel relieved, too. My true and great hope, though, is that God will be pleased with this message, that God will be honored and glorified in it and by it, that God will speak to each of us and all of us through this message, and that He will prompt us one and all to respond to it in a way that pleases Him. While I'm not going to talk about a raise in anyone's allowance, I do want to talk about what you and I do with our money (which is not really *our* money, anyway; it is just on loan to us from God). I want to talk about the grace of giving and the important place generosity occupies in the life of the body of Christ.

Today we dedicated our 2013 Faith Promises, symbolizing the commitment of ourselves and our substance – our financial resources – to the Lord Jesus Christ and to the ministry of the body of Christ here at Faith. I thank you for the promises in faith you have made. If you have not yet made a Faith Promise for 2013, I encourage you to do so this week or as soon as you are able, and I thank you in advance for the Faith Promise commitment you will make.

Whether you make a Faith Promise or not – and I hope you will, both for your own benefit and for the benefit of the church – I thank you for your giving to help fund the ministry and mission of our church.

There is no way to get around the basic fact that giving to God's work is an act both of worship and of discipleship. And generosity in giving is a beautiful expression of God's grace at work.

I want to thank you, the people of Faith, for your faithfulness and generosity in giving over many years. Many, many people in our own church family, in our community, and in places around the world, have been blessed by the generosity of your giving. *I* have been enormously blessed by your love and generosity. I think I understand what Paul means when he tells the Corinthians that “men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you” (2 Corinthians 9:13-14).

That is how I feel toward you, as I think of the many times and many ways you have been generous to me, and the many times and ways you have been generous toward one another when a member of our church family was confronted with an unexpected need, or had to deal with a personal “fiscal cliff.” You have given generously to the Deacons' Emergency Fund to provide for members of our church family in their need. I'm sure I don't know of all the times and ways you have helped one another or gave to others, because you did it quietly, with no fanfare. You didn't do it to get recognition. You did it as an expression of your love. Even if nobody else knows about it, God does. And He smiles. I thank you for your generosity to one another, born of love.

We have gone through some tough years financially as a church. We have struggled as the economy has struggled. But the Lord has brought us through. He has brought us this far by His grace. And through it all, you have given generously to support the ministry of this church. You have given generously to support local ministries such as Koinonia and Sanctity of Life Ministries in the *diakonia* or service they perform in the name of Christ. You have given generously to support the work of Christian missionaries around the world, including the Muslim world, where the gospel is so desperately needed. You have given generously to enable us to send short-term missionaries to places such as France, Mexico, Lebanon, Kenya, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Kentucky, and, in the case of my daughter Erin, South Africa and Swaziland so far, with China, the Philippines, and India to come in the next three months.

Ministry costs money. That is intuitively obvious, isn't it? Meeting needs in our community and in our own church family costs money. Sending out missionaries costs money. Enabling missionaries to remain on the field costs money. Ministry is more than money, yes. But money is an essential part of ministry. So, I thank you. I thank you for your generous giving in the past. I thank you for your generous giving in the present. I thank you for your promises in faith to give generously to God and His work among us in the coming year.

If you were afraid I might use this occasion to scold you or try to “guilt” you into giving more, you can breathe a sigh of relief. That is not what this is about. I hope I never do that. At the same time, this is not an occasion for self-congratulations. I don’t want any of you to get a swelled head and somehow think you are more wonderful than you really are. Paul warns against that, you remember, in Romans 12:3, where he says: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment.” Or, as it says in *The Message*, “The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what *God* is and by what *He* does for us, not by what we are and what we do for Him” (Romans 12:3, emphasis added). It is not about *us*. It is about *Him*.

When I commend you for the generosity of your giving, it is the plural “you” I have in mind. I don’t know how much anyone in the church gives, except for Neil and Mary Sue Smith. I don’t know what anyone else gives. I’m sure some of you give more generously than others do. That is how it is in every church.

Please understand that I’m not talking about *amounts* when I speak of *generous giving*. The *amount* doesn’t always reflect the *generosity* or lack of it. As you may remember, Jesus praised a poor widow who put just two small coins into the temple treasury. Many wealthy people came by and gave their offerings while Jesus watched. Some made large contributions. But Jesus wasn’t impressed by the amounts they gave. No. He told His disciples: “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others,” He said, “gave what they’ll never miss.” They gave out of their wealth. “She gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford” – out of her poverty – “she gave her all” (Mark 12:41-44, *The Message*).

The *generosity* or even *sacrifice* is not measured by the *amount*. This is the point Paul makes as he writes to the Corinthians about the collection for the impoverished believers in Jerusalem. In urging them to follow through on the promise they had earlier made to participate in this special offering, he tells them that the size of their gift is not the most important thing. If the willingness to give is there, he says, the gift is acceptable according to what you have, not according to what you don’t have (2 Corinthians 8:12). It isn’t about the *amount*, first and foremost, but about the *heart*. “Once the commitment” to give “is clear, you do what you can, not what you can’t. The heart regulates the hands” (*The Message*).

This topic of the special collection for the believers in the church at Jerusalem is the main focus of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Due to a prolonged downturn in their local economy, likely created or at least compounded by a severe famine, many of the Christians in Jerusalem found themselves in a serious predicament. The Lord put the desire in Paul’s heart to spearhead a special collection from the churches in Macedonia (including Berea, Philippi, and Thessalonica), Achaia (Corinth), and Galatia. In addition to 2 Corinthians, Paul mentions this offering in at least two other letters. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, he instructs the members of the church in Corinth, each of them, to set aside an amount of money every Sunday for the collection and to give it to the church, so it will be ready when Paul arrives to take it to Jerusalem. He also speaks of it in Romans 15, where, after expressing his desire to visit Rome on his way to Spain (15:23-24), he says: “Now ... I am on my way to Jerusalem in the

service of the saints there. For (the churches in) Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (15:25-26).

Paul’s hope in bringing it up again in 2 Corinthians was to motivate the Corinthians to make good on their promise to participate in the offering. He seeks to inspire them by telling the remarkable story of the churches in Macedonia, who, in the midst of their own poverty and need, did not allow their trials and hardships to impede their generosity. Nor did they permit the difficulties they faced to diminish their joy in giving to others. Paul was blown away by their extraordinary generosity. It was totally unexpected. For they gave not merely according to their means, he said, but beyond their means. More than they could afford. So strong was their desire to take part in the collection that they actually pleaded with Paul to let them do it. They saw it as a privilege, not an obligation.

Paul hoped the example of the Macedonian Christians would spur the Corinthians into action. But he gave them an even greater example of generosity and sacrificial giving. In 2 Corinthians 8:9, he said: “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” Jesus was and is the supreme example of giving. And His giving of Himself was an expression of His grace. Amazing grace, incomparable grace, sovereign grace – grace that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Like you and me.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to see, and I believe God wants *us* to see, that giving is properly understood as a response to grace, a response to the grace God has given us. Read 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and I think you will be struck by the number of times you encounter the words “generous” and “grace.” In the NIV translation, “generous” is used in one form or another eight times. And Paul uses *charis*, the Greek word for “grace,” eight times as well. Put these two things together, and it leads me to the conclusion that grace and generosity are intertwined with one another. Grace is at the root of true generosity. And generosity is the fruit of grace. Generosity in giving is a manifestation of grace. Do you see that?

After making his appeal to the Corinthians, Paul reminds them in 9:6 of the law of the harvest, also known as the law of sowing and reaping: “If you sow sparingly, you will also reap sparingly; but if you sow generously, you will also reap generously.” Said another way, “A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop” (*The Message*). The point is that you reap what you sow – a principle that applies not just to farming or giving, but to virtually every area of life.

Then, as we see in verse 7, Paul says that each of us should give what we have decided in our hearts to give. It is our decision to make. No one can make the decision for us. God does not want you and me to give grudgingly or reluctantly. He doesn’t want us to give out of a sense of guilt. He doesn’t want us to give because we have to. He doesn’t want us to give because of some outside pressure. The kind of giver in whom God delights is a cheerful giver (9:7b). You probably know that the word “cheerful” in the Greek is *hilaros* – from which comes the word “hilarious.” God loves a hilarious giver. Which is to say, God takes delight in those who take delight in giving. I suspect that is something we all need to ponder from time to time.

Generous giving, dear friends, is a distinguishing mark of a healthy church body, because generous giving is a sign of love. It is a sign of our love for God. It is a sign of our love for one another, and for others we are called to love in Jesus' name. And the truth is that the kind of giving that pleases God is more a matter of the *heart* than the *amount*. Thomas Jefferson, author of the *Declaration of Independence* and our third President, was not an orthodox Christian, but he was right about this: "When the heart is right," he said, "the feet are swift." When your heart is right with God, when you understand the wonder of His redeeming love for you, you have a desire to show His love to others. Having received, you have a desire to give to others. When your heart is right, generosity flows.

You may be pleased to know that this sermon is almost finished now. I cannot conclude without saying this, though: I praise God for the generosity of His love to me. I praise God for the generosity of His grace and love to you. I praise God for the generosity of His grace and love to the world. I trust that you do, too.

I praise God for your generosity in giving. May we all, by God's grace, continue to excel in the grace of giving, and excel even more, with grateful hearts, to the glory and honor of His name.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.