

Sowing Generously, Sharing Abundantly: Obedience

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on 2 Corinthians 9:6-15
at First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem on Sunday, April 23, 2017*

For these first three weeks after Easter, we will be talking in worship broadly about how we respond to resurrection, or rather: how does following in the way of the resurrected Christ affect our daily living? We'll spend time this summer talking about the practices of Christian living, but for these weeks, we will zero in on one particular practice – that of generosity in our financial lives – using one particular piece of the passage from Second Corinthians as our guide. And so today, we'll talk about WHY we give. Next week – HOW we give. And on May 7 – what happens WHEN we give.

So what exactly do we mean by “generosity”? Authors Chris Willard and Jim Shepherd define generosity as “a lifestyle in which we share all that we have, are, and ever will become as a demonstration of God’s love and a response to God’s grace.”¹ And history tells us John Wesley once famously said, ““Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can,

¹ Chris Willard and Jim Sheppard, *Contagious Generosity: Creating a Culture of Giving in Your Church*.

² Quote attributed to John Wesley and called his “Rule of Life”: <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/09/24/all-good/>

³ Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*.

⁴ Deep thanks to Scott Hudgins for the introduction to Williams and this dichotomy between possession and participation.

As long as ever you can.”² You might be thinking, goodness, that just stresses me out!

Those ideas all fine and good, but what lofty goals! There’s no way that could become the norm of my life!

Because you and I know a million reasons why not to be generous though, right? Like the disciples of Jesus whose fear locked them up inside doubting what life remained on the other side, we are afraid of what might happen if we loosen the grip on our resources. What if I give \$20 away, but then I can’t buy myself a meal? What if I add a charitable donation of \$100 into my monthly expenses, but then I can’t pay off my student loans more quickly? What if I make a big donation from my investments, but then the stock market tanks and I lose part of my retirement funds? What if by being more generous, my own financial security becomes unstable?

There’s also a sense in which we deserve what we have – we worked hard for the money we make, and that money never seems to be enough to cover all that we want and need it to do. Not even good research sways us sometimes. For in a study of thousands of Americans, researchers Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson found a consistent connection between regularly practicing generosity and leading a better life: the more generous people are, the happier they are. They have fewer illnesses and injuries, less

² Quote attributed to John Wesley and called his “Rule of Life”: <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/09/24/all-good/>

depression, but a stronger and more meaningful sense of purpose.³ So with all these benefits, why is generosity and generous living such a struggle sometimes?

Paul understood this in our reading today. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul picks back up on a theme from earlier in his ministry, namely collecting money to serve the poor in Jerusalem. For Paul, this collection serves multiple purposes: providing relief for those in need, connecting the Gentile churches of the Aegean culture with the Jewish churches of the Palestinian culture. Unlike their Macedonian neighbors to the north, it seems that enthusiasm by Christians in Corinth to support Paul's fund had stalled. What once was a priority has now gotten shifted among the Corinthians. And so these words of Paul in chapters 8 and 9 were intended to reenergize the church, to frame for these Christians the meaning behind their gifts, why they matter to God, how they should be given, and what happens when such gifts are made.

Did you pick up on that great gardening imagery in our passage? Jenna began the reading with these words: "the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Many of us may hear this as a negative claim – you reap what you sow, all actions have consequences, you get what's coming to you. But what if we heard this in a different manner? – you reap what you sow, the more you put into something, the more you'll get out of it; *the abundance of your living comes from the abundance of your giving.*

³ Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson, *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive, Grasping We Lose*.

Preaching about money is a bit tricky, so I want to be sure you hear me clearly – I’m not suggesting that there’s always a direct causality between financial giving and financial receiving, that if you give away \$1000, you’ll receive it back tenfold. But rather, I think that the more our lives are invested in that which we plant, the more we’ll gain in return. For example, if I plant a tomato plant in my yard (which I’m planning to do here soon), hypothetically I am going to work hard to ensure that it takes root and grows! I am going to be far more invested in those tomatoes than I am the ones I buy at the store, and in turn, I’ll enjoy those tomatoes more, I’ll taste their flavors more fully, I’ll eat them more slowly and intentionally, and of course, I’ll boast proudly to all who will listen: “Look! I didn’t kill the plant!” In the same way, if I channel a good bit of time and energy into a project, I care far more about its outcome than I do a project that has little involvement on my end, and in turn, I receive more satisfaction in its success, more ownership of my role in it, more excitement when it launches, more attention to a good outcome.

So it is too with giving. If you and I are generous with our money, giving freely and investing it into people and communities that matter, we are going to be attentive to it. Let’s talk about giving to God through the church, for example. If we are obedient to the call of God and sow our money generously through our beloved community, we reap the harvest, a harvest that looks like life together in abundance. As our investment increases, our involvement increases. Our care increases. Our connection to one another and to

God increases. Our passion for this church increases. Our desire for its flourishing and health increases. Who wouldn't want such a harvest?

I for one! Well, a younger and more fearful me. I'll never forget when God's call for obedience in generosity hit home for me, and frankly, I didn't want to answer. In our adolescent life, my parents taught my brother and I about the importance of giving money away. (And I don't just say this because they're here today!) Whatever allowance money we received as kids was given in small enough denominations so that we understood how to take 1/10 of it to tithe, or to give it to God through the church. But as I floated rather rootlessly throughout my 20s, ungrounded in a church home in which to practice generous giving, I'll admit that I fell out of the habit. In those years, I was either an unemployed grad student or a modestly-employed aspiring musician, so every penny I made, I either kept or spent. Those years of habitually holding on to what little money I had hit a wall when I was hired as a minister for the first time some years ago. I remember the realization that hit me like those moments you have when a memory resurfaces years later and smacks you in the face: *Right!*, I thought. *I have to start giving to the church again!*

Giving to me at that time in my life felt like a burden (as evidenced by my reaction!), an occupational hazard that I had to grit my teeth and bear. In those days, Josh and I were newlyweds, neither one of us making all that much money, but now assuming the full weight of a mortgage, student loans, car payments, credit card bills, utilities,

phone, food, insurance, vet bills for our dog, you name it. We knew we dreamed of starting a family, and rumors about the cost of kids had started to insert themselves into our financial consciousness. So that 10% which on a kids' allowance seemed like nothing, now on a modest salary with lots of expenses and a major savings goal seemed completely unreasonable. If I'm being honest, I felt resentful towards the church and towards God for even suggesting that I give something away. And so for awhile, we gave meagerly of what little leftover we had after all the bills were paid. Regardless of the amount, I would not call the way in which we gave then *generous*.

But like many of you, I'm sure, life happened in those subsequent months and years – as well as a whole lot of learning from those who were infinitely wiser, kinder, and more generous than me -- had a way of softening this giving practice that had felt like such a burden. With a community of faith in which to live out my Christian journey, I began to see what my dollars – however ordinary – were doing. I saw people whose past experience of church was at best, indifferent, and at worst, abusive, whose lives were being transformed by a welcoming and inclusive church family. I watched ministries emerge for the underserved and disadvantaged, where the availability of funds meant that those who were hungry, ate; those whose education was limited, expanded; those who needed empowerment, found it. I had a front row seat to the intimate connections between God

and a people, and a people to one another, and realized that this was a harvest of abundance in which I was privileged to participate.

In the midst of this slow transformation in my life came the birth of our children, whose tiny and vulnerable lives instinctually raised for me that same spirit of possessiveness I had felt about our money. In the same way my hands were cupped protectively around our family's budget, I felt entirely protective of my kids – what they ate, how much they slept, what diaper they used, you name it – and fearful of all that could happen to them if I picked a car seat that was less safe or a food that made them sick. And even on a day like today, where we dedicate my youngest and covenant together to raise a child, it's hard not to feel like these precious ones are my responsibility as a mama, mine to preserve and protect.

Professor and scholar Daniel Day Williams says, “love grows as it discovers that its claims, its demands, and its fulfillment is the spirit of participation rather than possession.”⁴ And just as wise people helped me in my life to open my hands to give generously, wise people taught me that even the greatest things I have in my life – the relationships of children, spouse, family, and friends – are gifts! They're not mine to have and guard and possess, but rather grace upon grace from God which invite me to participate time and time again.

⁴ Deep thanks to Scott Hudgins for the introduction to Williams and this dichotomy between possession and participation. This quote is found from Daniel Day Williams' book, *The Spirit and Forms of Love*, p209.

So I ask you today: take any of the great gifts of your lives, those things that you love – your time, your money, your gadgets and houses and vacations and investments, your expertise, your relationships, your children, your church – and ask yourself: am I approaching these things in a spirit of possession, of holding tight to all that is mine in the fear of what may happen if I loosen my grip even a little bit? Or might I have the spirit of participation, of accepting that all these things are gifts, gifts that I am asked to shepherd and steward for a season, and in which I am invited to fully participate? And may that spirit of participation, of obedience to the God who sows seeds of grace and abundance lavishly in our life, be a participation of seed-sowing just as extravagantly?

I once heard a proverb about leadership that stems the Ashanti people in Ghana, but I find it applies to this question of the gifts we possess. The proverb says this: “the responsibility of power – or in our case, possessions, the things we have – is like holding an egg. Grasp it too tightly, and it will shatter in your hand. Hold it too loosely, and it will slip from your fingers.”⁵

How are you holding all the seeds of life in your hand? What might happen if you relinquished some fear about possessing them tightly, and instead participated with God

⁵ I first heard this proverb at a CBF General Assembly in a business session, as I watched the passing down of a figurine from one moderator to the next. The figurine is a person holding an egg loosely, and this image has stuck with me ever since I heard it. It's referenced in the book *Ordinary Missionary: A Narrative Approach to Introducing World Missions*, by W. Jay, Pamela A., and Emily G. Moon, p96.

by sowing them deeply in the soils of Love? What if resurrection that began one early morning in a garden looked to you like generosity?

Just imagine what a harvest it will be! Amen!