

FIVE PRACTICES OF FRUITFUL LIVING
Week 6: Session 5 – The grace of giving
The Practice Extravagant Generosity

Lent 5 Year C

Is 43:16-21; Ps 126; Phil 3:4b-14; Jn 12:1-8

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2 Corinthians 9:11

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹**You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us;**

Imitation, they say (whoever “they” are) is the sincerest form of flattery. It is also an effective method of discipleship. Throughout his letter to the Philippians, Paul sets a number of examples before his Philippian disciples for them to emulate. In chapter one, Paul models an attitude of thankfulness in the midst of suffering. He rejoices that his imprisonment has inspired others to proclaim Christ more boldly (1:12-14) and he sets a paradigm for Christ-focused sacrificial living as he announces that for him, “Living is Christ and dying is gain.” (1:21)

Then, in chapter two, Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate Christ’s humility when he poetically describes Jesus as one who emptied himself and gave up his divine status to live as a human servant and die a criminal’s death.

In chapter three, Paul’s emphasis on imitation continues. Once again, Paul is going to use himself as an example of faithful discipleship so that the believers might find a firm foundation in the face of a looming threat to the community.

In today’s lectionary reading from Philippians chapter 3, Paul uses a common rhetorical method for convincing the Philippians to resist the lure of those who call themselves

Christians but are in fact, heretics. It's his look-at-me-and-do-what-I-do strategy. Paul teaches through example, while encouraging believers to imitate him. This is why he launches into a brag list of his Jewish qualifications in verses 4 to 6. "Look at me," he says, "if someone like me, a zealot who practiced Jewish law perfectly and had the highest credentials and Hebrew ancestry, laid aside all that honour to pursue Christ, then surely the way to righteousness comes in relinquishing advantage, not in boasting of status and excelling at the law." Paul beats the Jewish opponents at their own game with his super Jewish status and then asserts that they were all playing with the wrong deck in the first place. Paul writes,

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:8-9a, 10-11)

Now, it's important to note at this point that Paul is not denigrating his former way of life as if it were worthless. On the contrary, his heritage and history are of great value to him. However, when laid beside the life in Christ—the life of freedom and sacrifice—the life he now lives and models for other believers—these "advantages" are worth nothing. When Paul weighs his lifetime of gains against the knowledge of Christ, it makes all his past achievements of no use to him. Rather, they are like putrid rubbish.

In his pursuit of the knowledge and imitation of Christ, Paul has sacrificed everything. It is this "sharing in Christ's sufferings by becoming like him in his death" that will help Paul attain resurrection from the dead. Paul wants the Philippian Christians to recognize the importance of sacrifice and submission in his life and imitate that in theirs. Imitation is certainly an effective method of discipleship for Paul—one that we would do well to take particular notice as we enter into week five of Lenten program of *The five Practices of Fruitful Living*.

This brings us to the practice of fruitful living for this week: "The Practice of Extravagant Generosity", or "The Grace of Giving."

As we have heard of Paul's sacrifice in order to know Christ, through his letter to the Philippians, so we also need to understand what sacrifice might mean for us, within the context of our own relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. It's true that in many places around the world, to "know Christ" will mean exactly what it meant for Paul—loss

of status, loss of worldly possessions, hardship, suffering and perhaps even loss of life. There are many people around the world—even here in Australia—who continue to suffer in many and various ways because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

For most of us, however, the most sacrifice that we will be asked to make is that of time and of a financial nature. It is of this second kind that we will be focussing on this morning—the Practice of Extravagant Generosity” —“the Grace of giving”

The Message (a loose translation of the New Testament, translates 2 Corinthians 9:11, this way:

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.

In chapter five of his book, Robert Schnaze writes,

The practice of Extravagant Generosity stretches us to offer our utmost and highest to God rather than to give in a manner that is haphazard, unplanned, reactive, minimalist, mediocre, or mechanical. People who practice Extravagant Generosity give with unexpected liberality; they make giving a first priority; and they plan their giving with great energy and passion. They go the second mile. They do not give from a “what remains” mentality, but from a “what comes first” priority. Giving seriously becomes a personal spiritual discipline, a way of serving God, and a means of helping the church fulfill its God-appointed mission. Focused conviction and intention causes them to give in a more pronounced way, without fear and with greater trust. Giving changes their lives.

That’s quite a mouthful, isn’t it? I’ve included this rather long quote because I don’t usually like talking about money in this way. I was never very good at maths and I hate feeling like I am asking people, who are already generous in many ways—including financially—to dig deeper than what they already are. And it’s not just about being able to provide sufficient funds to the church so that you can afford to employ a minister. That’s obviously important—but that’s only a part of the whole story. Extravagant generosity, in a financial sense, is about sharing your resources—in this case, your financial resources—so that others may receive blessing. Both the giver and the receiver, are recipients of God’s grace. But that’s not our motivation for giving either. Our motivation for being generous is our acknowledgement of God’s generosity towards us. The root of generosity, therefore, is God’s love. Knowing God and experiencing God’s love lead to generosity.

With that motivation leading us on, we have only to work out the means and the direction of our generosity. And most of that is about priorities—how we determine where our giving goes and how we change our lives in accordance to God, calls us to be generous. The “where” is in accordance to where the Holy Spirit leads. For most of us, financial generosity will find its way into the bag at offering time—or by regular direct depositing—or however it is you give to the church. The “how” may be somewhat more difficult for some, but for that too, we need to be guided by the Holy Spirit. God will always provide what he wants us to give.

All of us need to learn to enjoy things without possessing them. We need to learn to moderate our materialistic instincts, and to find satisfaction in simpler things. During the Christmas holidays, Dottie and I spent quite a bit of time cleaning out cupboards and wardrobes—getting rid of things that we never use or haven’t used in a long time. If you have Netflix, you may be familiar with Marie Kondo and her particular method of tidying up. It seems to be a proven fact that having too much stuff hinders your quality of life.

The bottom line is that giving helps us to become what God wants us to be. It reveals and fosters trust in God. And it ministers to the needs of others. It’s one of the ways we preach the gospel to others and helps to fulfil the needs of others who are less fortunate than us.

Generosity helps us to flourish by aligning us with God purposes—by deepening our relationship with God—and by mirroring God’s generous nature to us and the world. It changes us inside and helps us to foster a healthy relationship to money. It also honours the loving sacrifice, Christ made for us.

The realisation that all we are comes from God and that all we have belongs to God, leads us to the practice of Extravagant Generosity. Generosity results from a reorientation in our thinking about how we find contentment in life—contentment that is determined by inner spiritual qualities, rather than by outward circumstances, visible achievements, or material comforts.

Generous giving is a way of putting God first. It is an outward sign of an inner spiritual alignment in order that we may gain Christ and be found in him.

To Christ our Saviour, be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.