

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 10 of 13)

The Gospel Creates Generosity

Romans 15:22-33

Mark Vroegop

²² This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, ²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. ²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. ³⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, ³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. ³³ May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. (Romans 15:22–33)

Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843), the Presbyterian pastor in Scotland who is well known for his yearly Bible reading plan and his short life (he died at age 29) said, "To give largely and liberally, not grudgingly at all, requires a new heart."¹ Do you understand what he is saying?

McCheyne's point is that there is a cause-effect relationship between the gospel and generosity. Those who have experienced the lavish grace of God in their lives (the cause) will be motivated toward a life of generosity (the effect). When one has tasted and seen the Lord's goodness, there is a Holy Spirit-empowered desire to be a conduit of God's grace. A new heart creates new desires, which creates new actions. A heart that has been graced by God creates a life that "graces" others.

I want to give you a biblical axiom that is all over the Bible and is especially present in our text today: **the gospel creates a generous life.** It creates a life characterized by sharing.

Now I want to unpack this today, and help you see this in Paul's life as he begins to talk about some very specific circumstances in his life. The verses before us are personal and tactical. Paul is telling the church about his plans. But there is more here than just travel details.

This text shows us the way that a gospel-centered mindset shows up in very specific and practical areas. It shows us that generosity is much more than just giving money, although it includes that for

¹ Timothy Keller, *Ministries of Mercy – The Call of the Jericho Road*, (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1997), 63.

sure. Generosity is a mind-set that is birthed by the gospel and that is lived out in real life. Specifically, we can see generosity surfacing in regards to a shared mission, shared resources, and shared concerns.

Shared Mission

Last week we heard Paul's heart as it related to his ministry of reaching the Gentiles. He was proud of his work for God (Romans 15:17), and he was pressing forward to continue his missionary plans, which involved traveling to Spain to preach the gospel.

In verses 22-24, we get yet another window into Paul's heart, and we get a glimpse of an area related to generosity that we might not often consider: being generous with our plans. Paul is explaining to the church why he has not been able to visit them, and we get a sense of the cost.

²² This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³ But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, ²⁴ I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. (Romans 15:22–24)

Paul clearly longed to go to Rome. He was eager to see the people and to preach the gospel to them (Romans 1:15). But there was another purpose in his life that eclipsed all other purposes, and we heard about it in 15:20 – “to preach the gospel not where Christ has already been named. . .” Despite how much Paul wanted to visit Rome and how much they may have wanted him to come, there was a greater mission and a greater purpose for Paul and Rome. The mission to reach the unreached peoples in the Roman Empire was worth the personal sacrifice on the part of Paul and the sacrifice on the part of the church at Rome. Paul desired to visit the church for many years, but that longing had been providentially deferred.

What's more, it is clear that Paul is moving on from his present location of ministry because he accomplished the mission that God has given him. Surely there was still more gospel work to do in that area, but Paul is a pioneer. His mission is to go where the gospel was not yet preached. And don't forget that unreached peoples are unreached for a reason. They are usually resistant to the gospel, expensive to reach, and not entirely safe. There is a gospel-centered generosity here in that Paul is not going to stay around and see the specific fruit of his labors. His mission is to go where it is hard, and he is inviting the church in Rome to share in this mission. God's mission was Paul's mission. And he wanted the Spain mission to be Rome's mission.

Gospel-driven generosity means that Paul is concerned about more than Paul, and Rome is concerned about more than Rome. The gospel mission creates an appetite within the heart of the believer to share in the mission of God in the world. The gospel sets the stage for a beautiful awareness and sacrificial engagement in what God is doing.

So, do you have a sense of gospel mission for something beyond yourself? Last week we talked about the joy of gospel work and how Paul was able to be proud of his work for God. This text orients us toward the kind of personal cost or sacrifice that comes with a mission from God. In other words, generosity involves more than just the giving of one's money. It also includes allowing God's mission

to take priority over our time, our plans, our expectations and our agenda. This is often an overlooked aspect of gospel-centered generosity.

No one volunteers and serves at without giving generously of their time. Sunday school teachers studied their lessons last night instead of watching a movie. TechServe volunteers sacrificed sleep in order to arrive on site at 6:30. First Hand Ministries spend time after each service talking with people when they could be going out to lunch. Small group leaders spend time preparing discussions and pouring their lives into people's problems. Our Lay Elders donate hundreds of hours each year to help shepherd our congregation. Youth leaders pour their lives into our teenagers on Sundays and Wednesdays.

Anyone who serves in any capacity has made a generous decision to give up what they could be doing for engaging in the mission of God. And it is beautiful! To serve God effectively – individually or corporately – means that you have decided to lay your life, your time, and your energy down as an offering to the Lord. You hold your plans loosely. You hold your life loosely. The reason is because of the eclipsing mission of God.

Paul yielded his plans to visit Rome. He yielded his right to stay in one location. And Paul wanted the church at Rome to share in his mission to Spain. The gospel creates a generous life as it relates to a shared mission.

Shared Resources

The second area related to gospel-centered generosity is the sharing of resources or financial support. This is the most common and familiar application of generosity, and there is a particular context here that is important for you to understand. In verse 25, Paul says that he is going to Jerusalem in order to bring aid to the saints.

Many scholars believe that Paul wrote the book of Romans in Corinth at the end of his third missionary journey, and the book of Acts helps us to know a bit of the historical background:

²¹ Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."²² And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. Acts 19:21–22 (ESV)

Rome is on his heart, and he is half-way there geographically. But Paul goes the opposite direction to Jerusalem in order to "bring aid to the saints." What is this about?

A famine had struck Palestine, and there were Jewish believers who were in desperate need of financial assistance. These Jewish Christians were likely under extreme pressure not only because of the ecological disaster, but also because many of them would have been ostracized by their families and cut off from help and aid. Paul saw this need in the lives of Jewish Christians as a great opportunity. So Paul invited Gentile believers to give a love offering to meet the needs of Jewish believers. He would take a 1,000 mile detour in order to deliver this strategic and meaningful gift.

In verse 26 Paul says that Macedonia and Achaia have “have been pleased to make some contribution to the poor in Jerusalem.” As Paul traveled through modern-day Greece, he presented the opportunity for these Gentile believers to give. Their giving became a very important example of sacrificial giving that Paul used to motivate other believers. Let me show you how important this gift was by taking you to two other places in the New Testament:

¹ Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. 1 Corinthians 16:1–2 (ESV)

¹ We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. ⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 2 Corinthians 8:1–8 (ESV)

The Macedonians had given out of their poverty to meet the needs of the Jerusalem saints. Paul used their generosity to motivate the wealthier Corinthian church to give as well. And he even sent Titus to Corinth, carrying the letter of 2 Corinthians to ensure that the gift was fully collected (see 2 Cor. 9:5). This gift was a big deal!

Why was the gift so important? Why would Paul take a 1,000 mile detour? There are two reasons why this gift was crucial, and through these we get a clear sense of the two-sides of generosity. Think of them like two sides of the same coin: joy and responsibility. Giving involves both motivations.

1. Joy

In verse 27 we read “they were pleased to do it.” This is the second time in two verses that the word “pleased” is used. The Greek word (*eudokeo*) means to take a high degree of pleasure, to approve, or to take delight in something. It means giving that is motivated out of joy, happiness, and strong desire. The Macedonians gave because they wanted to, and this is especially meaningful considering their poverty.

You can probably easily add this word in this sentence: “God loves a _____ giver.” That is a principle that emerges in 2 Corinthians 9:6–7.

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:6–7 (ESV)

Generosity expressed in the sharing of one's resources comes from a willing heart. The gospel creates a heart that values and loves what giving gives rather than what money gives. However, giving is not only about joy. There something more.

2. Responsibility

Often 2 Corinthians 9:7 is used to say that there is no sense of responsibility in our giving. However, the text says that we should not give reluctantly or under compulsion. That would be the wrong motivation. But that does not negate an appropriate and biblical understanding of responsibility. Giving should not be motivated by "have to" but it should be motivated by "want to" and "should."

In verse 27 Paul even uses debt-oriented language to describe the motivation in giving:

²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. Romans 15:27 (ESV)

Paul's argument is that since the Gentiles have received the spiritual blessings from Jewish Christians, then it is only right for the Gentiles to give to the physical needs of Jewish Christians. In other words, there is an appropriate level of responsibility that spiritually blessed people have in regards to their material goods. If you have been blessed, then there is some level of responsibility to give.

Paul believed that since the Gentiles had received spiritual blessings from the Jews, it was fitting and right for the Gentiles to bless the Jewish Christians. He saw the gift as a means of fellowship between them. In fact, the word for "contribution" in verse 26 is the Greek word *koinonia*, which means fellowship. By their giving, the Gentiles were fellowshiping from a distance with the impoverished Jewish Christians. They were bearing the burdens of others and making a very significant statement through their money.

Do you see now how important that gift was to Paul? Do you see why he would take this 1,000 mile detour? To go back to Jerusalem was not an easy trip, nor was it a safe one. And yet he believed that this offering was important enough that it warranted that kind of activity. Paul believed that the sharing of resources would send a very strong message about the gospel.

Is that how you think about the sharing of your resources? Do you see money as something that has the potential to create fellowship, partnership, and a platform for the gospel? Do you see that giving involves both joy and responsibility?

One of the reasons why I think that the local church should be a priority in our giving is because it is the place from which we receive spiritual blessings. If you love your church, if you are blessed by your church, you should give to your church. When we were collecting money for the new sanctuary, someone made a very insightful comment about the old sanctuary. They said, "For years I've benefited from the generosity of others as they provided a place for me to meet with the Lord. Now it is my turn to do that for someone else." I think that is the right heart.

But I don't just want to limit it to the church as a whole. When you have people around you in need, do you think about your responsibility to be a part of the solution? And do you see how generosity

can be a way for you to join them in their trial or difficulty? You may wonder, “What can we do to help?” You can always give.

Giving says something about what we really love, what we really value, and how much the gospel is really worth to us. You may be giving regularly and generously, and if so, be encouraged that the consistent practice of generosity is really good for your soul. If you struggle with giving, ask the Lord to help you find some place to start. Don’t miss the opportunity to tangibly express that you really believe that the gospel is special. If the gospel has changed your heart, then it will show up in regards to how you share your resources. The gospel creates generosity with our resources.

Shared Concern

The final aspect of generosity relates to Paul’s personal relationship with the church at Rome and his desire to have them help him bear the burdens of the ministry. Verses 28-33 are intimate, heart-felt, and pastoral.

Paul begins by telling the church of his intention to visit them after he completes the delivery of the Jerusalem offering.

²⁸ When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you. ²⁹ I know that when I come to you I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. Romans 15:28–29 (ESV)

Since Paul had never actually visited the church in Rome, he wanted them to be assured of his intention, his love, and his desire to see them. What’s more, he longed to be with them so that he could be a part of Christ’s work in their lives (“... come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ”). This is very similar to what Paul said in 1:11, where he longed to “impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you.” Obviously Paul’s heart was with the Roman church, even though he had never visited them.

The sad story is that while Paul was in Jerusalem, he was arrested. And after a number of years, Paul’s case made its way through the Roman courts until he did finally arrive in Rome. However, he was under house arrest. The Book of Acts ends with Paul able to preach the gospel in Rome while under home confinement and awaiting his trial.

If you think about it, we benefit today from that providential hindrance because without the trip to Jerusalem, we would never have had the book of Romans. Without his imprisonment, we would not have had four other books: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. God was at work even through the difficulties in Paul’s life.

It is in verses 30-33 where we are able to fully see Paul’s desire for the church to share his burden. He longs for them to pray for him.

³⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, ³¹ that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³² so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy

and be refreshed in your company. ³³ *May the God of peace be with you all. Amen. Romans 15:30–33 (ESV)*

Notice the unique Trinitarian appeal: “*by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit . . . prayer to God on my behalf.*” There is something beautiful about the church caring for one another in the same way that the Trinity expresses their unity.

Paul specifically asks that they “strive together” with him. This word means to wrestle along with someone or to enter into battle. The idea is that they come alongside him in his ministry by praying specifically for him. There is a high degree of personal specificity in verse 30 as he says, “strive together **with me** in your prayers to God **on my behalf.**” There is a clear sense of personal connection that Paul wanted them to have by virtue of their prayers.

There are few things more discouraging than walking through a personal struggle or a ministry challenge alone. The attacks of the enemy are powerful, the internal discouragement can be so real, and the thought of being all alone is terrible. But when there are people struggling with you in prayer, there is great encouragement and hope. The prayers of the church would move the resources of heaven to action and create a beautiful sense of spiritual strength as others help bear the burden.

Don’t ever diminish the power of praying with someone or for someone. Don’t negate the comfort and the help of having people strive together with you in prayer. Don’t forget to pray for those who are on the front lines of the battle. This year we ran out of our Global Outreach Prayer Guides. So we have printed even more. Why? Because there is something powerful and encouraging as we join in prayer for our missionaries. Our Barnabas prayer teams are laboring in prayer for our missionaries. And when they do, they are entering into the kind of beautiful unity expressed in the Trinity itself.

What does Paul ask for prayer about? Three things: 1) That he would be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea. Jerusalem was not a safe place for Paul, and there were many who feared that he would be arrested or even killed. 2) That his service would be acceptable to the saints. Paul was not always well-received by the Jewish Christians, and he wanted the gift and his service to be effective. All of this work had gone into the collection, and he had traveled so far to deliver it. Paul wanted it to be a productive visit. And 3) that he could come to Rome and be refreshed by their company. Paul asked them to pray that God would make it possible for his visit to happen. Even at the end of his letter, Paul opened his hands to what the Lord wanted in his life.

He closes this portion of the letter with the following words: “May the God of peace be with you all. Amen.”

Do you see how the gospel creates a generous life? The Roman church needed to be concerned about Spain. The Macedonians needed to be concerned about the believers in Jerusalem. And the Roman Christians needed to be concerned about Paul. This other-centeredness combined with a willingness to have a shared mission, to share our resource, and to share one another’s concerns is something that is beautiful and compelling.

Underneath biblical generosity is a very different way of thinking. Generous living springs from a new heart – one that now lives by a new value set.

Tim Keller uses an illustration of dying man to make this point very clear:

Imagine a person who is deathly ill. The doctor announces to him that there is a medicine which can certainly cure him. Without it, he has not hope. "However," says the doctor, "it is extremely expensive. You will have to sell your cars, even your home, to buy it. You may not wish to spend so much." The man turns to his doctor and says, "What do my cars mean to me now? What good will my house be? I must have that medicine; it is precious to me. These other things which were so important to me now look pale by comparison to the medicine. They are expendable now. Give me the medicine." The apostle Peter says, "To you who believe . . . {he} is precious" (1 Peter 2:7). The grace of God makes Christ precious to us, so that our possessions, our money, our time have all become eternally and utterly expendable. They used to be crucial to our happiness. They are not so now.²

This illustration shows us that underneath every "thing" in life that we possess, use, or own, there is a value-set. And when the gospel informs that value-set, it changes how we view and handle "things" in this life.

The sharing of a common mission, our resources and our concerns comes from a heart that has been captivated by the beauty of the grace of Jesus Christ. A new heart creates a generous heart.

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² Ibid.