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SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE

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TITLE: Stewardship Pt. 1 (of 4)

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, once wrote that "there are three conversions necessary for the Christian: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind, and the conversion of the *purse*." Of these three, it may well be that we find the conversion of the purse to be the most difficult.

Charles Spurgeon agreed with Luther's sentiment. Spurgeon writes, "With some (Christians) the last part of their nature that ever gets sanctified is their pockets."

Oh no. You might have guessed it, but today, and the remainder of this week, we're talking about stewardship: Stewardship of our treasures. There's a great misconception that churches and Bible teachers only talk about money. But I think if we are honest with the information, Churches and Bible teachers try to refrain from teaching on money, because of the negative baggage associated with it. But we know as people who are committed to God's Word, and people who are committed to loving God more, then we have to care about what God cares about.

What does God really care about when it comes to money? Does He really care about the stewardship of our treasures? Well, it might surprise you, but there are over 2000 verses on the topic of money found in the Bible. Jesus spoke about money often. 40% of Jesus' parables deal with money. So the topic - wealth, money, greed, contentment, and stewardship of our resources - matters to God, so it should matter to us as well!

If you are listening today for the first time, you may be wondering, why are they talking about this? Why does Back to the Bible care about our stewardship? Well, we are wrapping up a series called Character Over Compromise. And we recognize that we are called to live in a way that is pleasing to God, and that brings Him glory. We are called to live a life that shines a light on Jesus Christ, so that He will be favored. We are called to live in a way that when people talk about us, all they can discuss is our Christian character. And thoughtful stewardship definitely builds our character AND brings glory to God.

So, we want to be like Daniel. Do you remember Daniel? We actually studied a piece of his life a couple months ago. Daniel lived a life of integrity of character so much so, that when King Darius' advisors and high officials wanted to condemn Daniel, they said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel, unless we find it in connection with the law of his God. In other words, this Daniel, his character is so good, that all we can say is he's a follower of

God”. That is exactly what we would desire for people to say about us. That's why we're talking about choosing character over compromise.

Every day we have opportunities to choose to follow God or to disobey. Every day we have a choice to make – whether it's lying or telling the truth; Whether it's acting out of anger or displaying patience; Whether it's cheating on a test or taking the ‘F; Whether it's not returning that item you borrowed or giving it back with a full tank of gas; Or maybe it's choosing greed instead of generosity. So that's why we're going to wrap up our series this week on the topic of stewardship. So we will take the next four days and work our way through Second Corinthians Chapters eight and nine.

So that you can understand the background of this letter: since Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the church had been persuaded by false teachers. These false teachers had influenced the Corinthian church to believe that Paul wasn't the real deal. They said he was proud. He was not a good communicator. He was nothing to look at, and ultimately he was unqualified to be an Apostle of Christ. So, Paul sends Titus to the Corinthian church to deal with these problems. But when Titus returns, Paul hears that the Corinthians have changed their heart. So Paul is writing this letter to express thanksgiving for their progress, but also to warn them of new threats, and prepare them for another visit by Paul. Now that you have the background of this letter, let's dig into Second Corinthians Chapter 8, beginning at verse 1 (ESV):

Paul writes, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a **severe test of affliction**, their **abundance of joy** and their **extreme poverty** have **overflowed** in a **wealth of generosity** on their part”.

So Paul has just commended the Macedonian churches in Chapter seven. And so now he's shifting his focus from a general commendation to the specifics of giving. Paul calls out specifically the churches of Macedonia. This is part of northern Greece, and included the churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Macedonia was a very, very poor region. It had been impacted by wars and robbed by the Romans. But despite this extreme poverty, the believers were *incredibly* generous.

And notice that Paul says it is all *by the grace of God*. That is important because Paul is saying, it's not because they wanted to be really great philanthropists, or because they had these social initiatives they wanted to try to achieve, or because they were looking for their name on some type of stone or brick. No, he says, *by the grace of God* they have given.

You see, one of the changes that a Christian will experience is sanctifying grace. And that sanctifying grace changes how we view our situations, our limitations, and the source of our treasure. When we become children of God, we –bit by bit– increase our desire to take care of the believers in our lives, just like these churches were doing.

Again, they weren't looking for recognition, or a party, or a tax incentive. They were doing it out of their love for God. It would appear that they were unaware that their generosity was so enormous.

What made this generosity so incredible? Paul shares in verse 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.

Let's look at some of Paul's words here. He says, "For in a severe test of affliction." The word severe is also translated as great. In other words, this wasn't a one-off experience or an occasional difficulty. No, this was an extreme, ongoing, and great ordeal. Paul uses the word "dokime" (dok ee may) for the word "test". This was a hardship. This was not a walk in the park. This was testing. It was something they would not ask for. It was a trial.

Then Paul uses the word affliction. It's the Greek word thilipsis (thil leep sis). It literally means pressure, like the pressure that creates, like the crushing of grapes. Think about the most stress you've ever felt. When people experience panic attacks, they feel like their world is closing in. They feel like they can't breathe. They feel like they're being squashed. Paul is saying, this ongoing trial of great magnitude feels like the crushing of grapes, or being put in a vise and twisted and twisted and twisted.

What were they going through? Well, we know from this verse that they had extreme poverty, and we'll talk about that in a minute, but we have to think about what the early church experienced. They were supplanting a Pagan culture with the culture of Christ. That meant suffering. That meant persecution. Listen to what Luke writes about what happened after Paul and Silas preached the Gospel in Thessalonica, "But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here. Also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things."

Life for the early church was not easy. You find other accounts of persecution in First Thessalonians, Second Thessalonians, Philippians, and more. But yet the Macedonians did not let their circumstances drive their behavior. They did not choose compromise over character. Instead, in the midst of the trials, they put the needs of others whom they had never met ahead of their own. Astounding.

DISCUSSION:

N: Let's break this down a little further with my discussion partners Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Cara, it's good to have you back again!

Here's my question for you both: Where have you seen or experienced the most generous hearted people and what was behind their giving?

C: Well, most generous hearted people - probably where you would least expect it: So blue collar types, people who work hard and have enough, but probably not a lot of extra. What's behind that? I would say just really good character, really salt of the earth people, as they say.

A: Yeah, I would agree a hundred percent. You know, oftentimes people think, well, it's the rich people - they can afford to be generous. And really, it has nothing to do with the amount of wealth; it has to do with the amount of heart.

N: Right. And I think you also see the greatest amount of joy in the people who just give freely. And it has nothing to do with, as you said, their wealth, but it seems like the people with the least amount of resources, when they give, it brings them the most amount of joy. And I'm not sure why that is, but it's really fun to see.

A: I agree. I have a very generous philanthropist that I'm very good friends with. And he always says, you know, Arnie, you can't out-give God.

As we look at the Macedonians in Paul's time, they were not just experiencing persecution, but they were also living in extreme poverty. Paul uses a word here for deep that literally means, *according to the depth*. We would say today "rock bottom". You see these people were in abject poverty. They had almost nothing. They were forced to beg to survive. You see, they lived in a world of high taxes, slavery, and low economic opportunities. Paul would actually use this same word to describe Jesus and his poverty in Philippians 2. It says that He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave and made in the likeness of man. He was impoverished. He hit rock bottom.

This reminds me of the widow's offering in Luke 21. In Luke 21, beginning in verse one, it says this, "Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, ² and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. ³ And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. ⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

This widow had nothing; she was impoverished. She only had two small coins, and yet she gave all she had. That's exactly what these churches were doing, despite their persecution and despite their beggar status.

You see, it's important to remember that health, wealth, and prosperity are not promised to us as Christians. Look at the history of the church. The apostles gave up everything to follow Christ, including their lives. God doesn't say that you will be *in* poverty because you are a Christ-follower. But we *must* be prepared to give up everything, in order to follow Jesus.

We can do this because we know that God will supply *all* of our needs. The Macedonians believed this. The apostles believed this. And so should we.

King David wrote in Psalm 37:25,

"I have been young, and now am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or his children begging for bread."

Paul wrote in Philippians 4:19,

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

This dependence upon God - this reality that God would meet their needs no matter what persecution, or what physical deficiency they would face – according to verse 2 – brought about an abundance of joy! Abundance here means a surplus; it was an overflowing. Well, how could that be possible, considering they were so poor? That's the question we ask today. How can people be so happy when they have so little? But the truth is, true happiness – true joy - does *not* depend on our external circumstances. Our happiness and our joy come from God's grace. God saving grace is overflowing; that's why John 1:16 says, *for from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.*

The Macedonians didn't give out of obligation or compulsion. They weren't giving because they were afraid of being punished. They were giving because they were simply conduits of God's grace. They gave freely and joyfully. Remember, according to 2 Corinthians 9, *God loves a cheerful giver.*

I think we have much to learn from the Macedonian churches. Our internet goes out, and we become disgruntled. It takes 10 seconds for data to go from our phone to a satellite in space and come back, and we are complaining about how slow the internet is. When we get fries instead of onion rings, it ruins our day. When it's tax time, and we have to write a check, but we still have a surplus in our accounts, we grumble. We allow life circumstances to rob us of our joy.

Physically speaking, the Macedonian churches had nothing but persecution and poverty. Spiritually speaking, they had wealth that nothing on Earth could match. And because of this reality, Paul says their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.

Wealth in the Bible can refer to physical or financial wealth. It can refer to the abundance of material possessions. You can refer to God's grace or the hope we have. But most commonly, it's referred to as our spiritual wealth. What the Macedonians lacked in material possessions and cold hard cash, they possessed in richness or wealth of liberality. We don't use that word much today. The Greek word is *haplotēs* (ha plo tace). It means simplicity, or sincerity, or singleness. You see, the Macedonians weren't double-minded in their giving. They weren't doing it secretly for themselves, but portraying a humble exterior. No, they were single-minded, so they thought of others more than themselves. They exemplified what Paul wrote to the Philippian church.

In Philippians 2, Paul writes, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

If Paul were writing a letter to us today, he'd say this: Friends I know life is weird today. It seems out of control. But no matter what trouble you are facing, no matter how little or how much you have – may God's grace overflow to those around you. Hold *nothing* back from God and from others.

N: Now let's turn to two very generous hearted people, Cara Whitney and Arnie Cole. So Arnie, what are some of the characteristics you see in truly generous people?

A: Boy, that's a great question, Nat. Over the years, I think it's not only a heart for giving financially, but it's a heart for giving, no matter what it is - whether it's a cup of coffee to someone who is in stress - it's a heart thing. That's what I've seen over the years.

N: Cara, I want to know from you, what personal lessons have you learned about giving?

C: I've learned a lot of them. I could name three big ones that I've learned. One is that sometimes there's tremendous prayer that needs to be involved with before you give. So depending on the circumstance, I personally know that nothing I have belongs to me. It belongs to God. So if God wants me to hand it over, I have no problem doing that. In many cases, Dan and I don't even think about it, or even talk about it, but we just do it. But on the flip side of that, I have seen the repercussions of what it looks like to give someone too much, or to pour into a situation that gets worse with giving. The second thing I'll add is, that make sure what you're giving is what God really wants you to do, and that you have a heart for it. So outside pressure, or Christian guilt, should not be your motivation for giving, because I don't think God wants disingenuous dollars. And the third thing, I'll say that giving can be something other than money. It could be time, or blessing a person with an experience they may not have access to normally - all different ways to be generous. It doesn't always look like money.

N: Yeah. I think that's a great point, because so many of us automatically think about giving away our money, but that really is just maybe one way we can do so. But you brought up something, and I'd actually like to hear from both of you on this. Obviously our giving needs to be an outflow of our heart. And so it's really up to God to handle the consequences. But how do you, I guess, find out what to do with someone, who it turns into enablement, you know? Because we do give to help, but sometimes people can abuse that, or it can create a really unhealthy situation for them. So how do you decide for that in your giving?

C: I think just with prayer. God needs people sometimes to hit rock bottom before He can work with them. And if you keep bailing them out, they're never going to get there. And I think it sort of interferes with - God's going to get done what He's going to get done - but I think it interferes with the game plan. I just think it takes a lot of prayer, and you know, between Dan and I, we can, I have someone to talk to about it. He has someone to bounce things off of me. So to just talk to maybe an outside source, because sometimes you need someone looking in at the circumstance to get some clarity with it.

N: Very good counsel right there.

A: Yeah, and I think you have to ask if you're trying to be the savior, you know. If you want to keep your testimony, I think it's pretty critical that the main thing remains the main thing, and you're not supplanting a person's focus on Jesus.

N: Right. Excellent counsel. Well, Arnie, let's talk about the poor widow, because the poor widow has a lot of meaning for us here at Back to the Bible. Talk about that for a moment.

A: Man, Nat, especially being in the nonprofit world, the widow's might always comes up, you know; who has the front row seat at the banquet? All of that stuff. And who, for me, who do I

listen to? Are you really listening to the person who gives so little, but percentage-wise, it's so big? Those are all things that are critical, as we shape ministry and leadership as well. If you had about an hour, I have a tremendous theory on the widow's mite, how really we market to the big givers, not the widow's mite. And oftentimes the response is accordingly.

N: And I think that's a great point, Arnie. Go ahead Cara.

C: Well, I've got a question for you, Nat. So a lot of fun craziness going on in the country right now. And so you have some money, and you get criticized for not giving enough, or you want to give liberally, but what's the idea of giving wealth away? And what's the difference between that, and this idea of socialism right now?

N: Man, yeah, it seems like that's an ever increasing topic of discussion right now: socialism and, for a Christian, some people have even argued that Christ promoted socialism actually. And I actually wrote a four part series on this awhile back. And the simple answer is this: It comes down to the heart. Socialism is something that's mandated and created by a governmental system. And it's mandated. You will give away; we will take what is yours, and we will take it and spread it amongst the people - a redistribution of wealth. That's not what the Bible calls for; the Bible calls for us, as believers, to meet the needs of those around us, out of our heart. The motivation is the heart; it's to glorify God and it's to pass on the grace He's given us. And so, again, it's not about a percentage; it's not about a mandate or doing something out of compulsion, but rather taking generously what God has given us, and meeting the needs of those around us. And trust me, there is no joy in socialism. You know, all of us in this room, we've traveled the globe, and we've talked to people in countries that are socialist and not. And I will tell you, and you can probably back me up on this, the people in socialist countries, or those who come from a past life of socialism, they say never go there. It'll destroy you and it'll destroy your country. And it is a joy stealer. There is no joy in socialism. So God says, *give generously, because I've given you generously*. That is the difference.