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SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE

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TITLE: Stewardship Pt. 2 (of 4)

When you think about your life, when were you most joyful? What moments, what seasons produce the greatest amount of joy? Many of you are probably thinking, “I don’t know, but I can tell you it was before COVID-19 hit”.

What circumstances surrounded those joyful moments? It may seem counter-intuitive, but I think some of my most joyful memories were when we had the least. My boys and I were out running errands, and I think we stopped to get ice cream. And I remembered many moments in our marriage, where there was not the option for everyone to get their own ice cream cone. We would get one and we would all have a lick. Or the time we went to Disney after graduating seminary, and we didn’t have the resources to both go to the Park and buy all the expensive food there, so we loaded up the stroller with trail mix, beef jerky, and apples, because it took every last penny to get into the theme park. Or I remember one Christmas that my wife and I didn't have much for resources, and neither did our life group at that point. We were very young in our journey as families. But we pulled together whatever we had, and we presented this one family with gift cards and groceries and presents, because they were in need and God had blessed us. It was during that time that we said “no” to ourselves and “yes” to others.

It's rather amazing that the moments where we had the least, and we gave out of our poverty – those moments have been the most joyful. Why is that? Well, we actually discovered that answer yesterday. This week we are working through Second Corinthians, Chapters eight and nine, and we're talking about stewardship. Yesterday, we discovered the Macedonian churches, who gave everything they had, despite the fact they were persecuted, and were living in abject poverty. And from this giving, it says they overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.

Former Back to the Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe said, “No computer could analyze this amazing formula: great affliction and the poverty plus grace equals abundant joy in abounding liberality!”

This reminds me of what Paul said a couple chapters earlier in Second Corinthians 6:10. He said, “*as poor, yet making many rich.*”

But Paul didn't stop there in his letter to the Corinthian church. So let's pick it back up in Chapter 8, beginning in verse three (ESV). Paul writes:

³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

Paul begins by saying this generosity was measured by their *means*. The NASB says, according to their *ability*. It literally means *power* or *strength*. You see, this really doesn't have to do with a set percentage. Rather, this points to the condition of their heart and of their abilities. And we'll talk about that in more detail a little later. But Paul says, "as I can testify." In other words, I have experienced this firsthand. This isn't just a rumor. This isn't just word of mouth. No, Paul actually *experienced* their generosity.

But not only were they giving in relation to their ability or their power, he says that they gave *beyond* their means. So, they weren't committed to a 5% a month donation, or a 10% donation. No, they gave out of their poverty, and above their means to give. It would have been sacrificial for these people: *Extremely sacrificial*. Their giving was way *beyond* what would be reasonably expected from them.

Their giving was reminiscent of David's posture towards sacrificial giving. 1 Chronicles 21:24 says, "But King David said to Ornan, "No, but I will buy them for the full price. I will not take for the LORD what is yours, nor offer burnt offerings that cost me nothing."

David realized that sacrificial giving has to actually entail sacrifice. He would not give something that cost him nothing. The widow, in Mark 12, gave all she had. The Macedonians gave with – I would say– reckless, and truly selfless sacrifice. And again, they did it joyfully. And that is so important, because you can give generously *without* giving joyfully!

Paul says they gave of their own accord. The Greek word is *authairetos* (ow thi ree tos). We get the word authority from it. It means they did it on their own authority. It was their own decision. It was not externally motivated.

So what did they do? They gave out of the abundance of their heart. Again, Second Corinthians 9:7 says, "*each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion.*"

You can even see this posture in Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:8. Listen to what Zacchaeus said:

"Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times that amount."

Jesus didn't tell him to give back half of his possessions or to pay back four times the amount. This was out of his heart. It was out of a conviction.

I think many of us today want to know what percentage we have to give. That fits very well with our bent towards religion. Religion says, to do this, and to not do that. It says, do this to earn Salvation, or keep your Salvation. That's not how it is with God. Yes, God has given very clear standards, and even commandments. We don't deny that. We know from James that our actions really do matter. We know Paul said we were saved for good works. But notice that our actions

are to be out of love for God. Our obedience is to be out of love for God; Not out of compulsion. So it was true for the Macedonians, and so it should be true for us.

DISCUSSION:

N: Now, let me bring in Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. And let me throw this out to the two of you: Most people hear the word “sacrificial” and assume that it’s something that’s going to hurt. What do you say to that? What’s your experience?

C: Well, if it's out of your heart, sacrificing is joyful. I mean, I've experienced joy firsthand, when you want to give, and you're excited to do it. But I'll tell you something. I've got to be super honest here. When I hear the word sacrificial, I immediately go to that question of, what am I giving up? And so I really realized what a huge jerk I was over the toilet paper shortage, because I have friends in California that were down to like one roll of toilet paper in March. And I literally found myself saying that I should send them a package, but then to do so would risk me being without. That is horrible. And I did not send toilet paper.

N: You didn't promote recycling the toilet paper for them.

C: But how much more joy would I have right now, knowing I would have sent it, but I didn't send it. So that’s sacrifice.

N: Well, we could be coming up on round two. So when it happens, I'm going to hold you accountable: Did you send them the toilet paper? Oh my goodness.

C: I will, because I really feel terrible about it. I really do. I mean, toilet paper, what is wrong with me? [Oh my goodness]. But I digress.

N: What about you Arnie? Any toilet paper analogies here?

A: No, no, but I agree. Sacrificial giving is a state of mind, and you can never out-give God, and you can't give enough, but it's a mindset. And if you've given your all, that's what Jesus requires, and it's not yours to begin with, like Cara said. It’s tough stuff when you try to put a formula on it, and you try to monetize something, and you know, can you give enough? What is enough? All of that stuff - Jesus owns everything you have. So it's all a matter of perception, and how you move forward with your time, talent and treasure.

N: Yeah. I think you both bring up a really good point. It's something we actually talked about yesterday, is our giving, though the focus of the message really has been on our money - It is beyond that, because sacrificial giving - it may not be monetarily for you. It may not be the issue of money. It may be time, or it may be toilet paper, as Cara brought up. But the reality is, for some of us, it may be really easy to write a check, but to go out and serve, that'd be really hard. Or whether it's going to serve is real easy, but actually stopping to listen to your neighbor vent about their life, or just to pour their heart out, because of a loss, or who knows what else, that might be the act of sacrificial giving. So I think we all need to be careful in evaluating all of our resources, as you brought up Arnie, and being sure we're giving that away freely as well.

So the Macedonians gave from their own authority, or from the abundance of their heart, but what's amazing is— according to Paul from verse 4— they begged for the opportunity to give. The Greek word for begging means to implore, or to plead. It's like getting on your hands and knees and saying, please, please, please, please, *please* let us give; Not just begging, but they did it earnestly. In other words, they were insistent. They begged with intensity.

Now I don't know what your church is like, but I have spent most of my life in two churches: One I served in as a member, and the other I pastored in. Both were very generous churches. I would say they were, or are, disproportionate in their posture for giving. Now, I can't say I had people knocking on my door as a pastor, begging incessantly for the opportunity to give. But I *can* say that consistently when the need arose— whether personally or corporately— the body of Christ gave abundantly.

And this giving of the Macedonians surprised Paul; that's why in verse five he says, “and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

This generosity, in spite of persecution and suffering, and *highly* sacrificial, was not expected. And then Paul says, *but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us*. The word “first” here is *protos*. It doesn't mean first in time. It means first in importance. Their priority was to give of themselves all they had to God first, and then The Church, and then to Paul, Titus, and Timothy; In other words, they were under the authority of the local church.

Paul continues in verse 6, “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.

Paul says, we urge Titus to *complete among you this act of grace*. What does that mean? That's kind of a confusing comment. Well, about a year earlier, Titus began the work of collecting a gift. Now Paul is saying, look, it's time to finish and make this gift real.

And then Paul affirms the church saying, “Look you guys are excelling or abounding in everything.” And then he gets specific, saying that they are excelling in faith. In other words, they understand what saving faith is. They're secure in their faith. They're growing and being changed because of their faith. Paul says that they're excelling in speech. The word here is *logos*. It doesn't refer to physical speech, or their talk. What it really is referring to, is the *word of truth*. It's they are growing in their passion for and their knowledge of the truth.

Paul says that they are excelling in knowledge. They're not just growing in their love of truth and sound doctrine. They are also growing in their knowledge of how to apply God's truth.

He says that they are excelling in earnestness. We could translate it as eagerness, or energy, or spiritual passion. And the pinnacle - they are excelling in love, and this is *agape* love. It's that love of self-sacrifice. It's the love that thinks more of others than themselves.

Paul then goes back to the issue of the heart in verse eight.

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.

Paul is not interested in a specific amount or percentage for giving. He says this is not a command. Giving is to be voluntary. It is supposed to be not out of compulsion, but out of love. He is saying, look the Macedonian churches - they get it. They are giving out of their poverty. They are giving above and beyond what the circumstance and their pocketbooks say. If there's one thing I'm saying, it's this: give freely just like them. That backs up the sincerity of their love. Sincerity is nice. But our actions can be sincerely wrong or negligent. Faith results in good works. The true test of love is not feelings, but actions.

And there is no greater example of sacrificial love than our savior Jesus Christ. Verse nine.

⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

Verse 9 gives us the Gospel, doesn't it? Jesus Christ is God - Always has been and always will be. From before the beginning of time, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, have always existed. And in a moment of time, God became flesh. The same God who created the universe, who holds it into existence, would be born in a stable. He would experience pain and suffering. He would experience disappointment and hurt. He would experience tiredness and hunger.

Verse nine reminds me of Philippians 2:6-7, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

You see, that's poverty. It's not that Jesus was literally poor, though we know, He was not financially rich. We know that He had no place to lay His head. He was rejected in His own hometown. But the God of the Universe would take on flesh, would suppress His abilities, and would become poor in the form of a servant. And that service would take Him to the cross.

We are born spiritually bankrupt: No hope. No spiritual job. No way to pay back the debt. Ephesians 2 would say that we were spiritually dead. The fact is, a corpse cannot do anything. They can't get up. They can't work. They simply rot. But by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, by His poverty, by His submission, we become children of God. By His wounds, we have been healed. By His death, we become alive.

Because God shed his grace on us, and continues to do so each and every day, we are called to be grace givers. Because God was willing to give Himself up for us, we must be willing to give up ourselves for others.

One of the greatest challenges we have as Americans, is to not hold so tightly to our things and to our money. We as Christians need to remember that everything we have is grace. Period! Everything we have is by the hand of God. God gives us those, to bring Him glory and honor. He

gives us those to, yes meet our needs. But He gives us those, so that we might freely give back to Him and to those around us.

That's why Paul continues in verse 12:

¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

Paul is saying, because of what Christ has done, and because of the grace given to you, help others as He has helped you: Not a set percentage. Not out of obligation. Not as a social program. But give from what you have sacrificially, and when you have your moment of need, God will use them to help you.

Remember, God's not hung up on the proportion of your gift, but rather the preparation in your heart. As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

N: All right, let's turn back to Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney. Cara, when you give, what are you actually giving according to God's plan, and why is this so important?

C: The answer is grace, Nat. Nothing I have is deserved. It's been given to me by God. That includes my Salvation. Therefore, we extend that grace to others, whether we feel like they deserve it or not.

N: Okay. Now I don't know if this is hard for you, but I think it'd be really hard for us to give away so freely, what God has given us, and we recognize it is all grace. So why do you think we struggle with this?

C: Because we're selfish people. I mean, that's the short answer, but sort of the whole enchilada. I mean, that's what I always tell when I witness to people, is like, you don't have to teach a kid to be selfish. We're just selfish. I mean, I can give checks all day long. What I find I struggle with personally - and I purposely stretch myself - is time, but every time I give time, I am rewarded spiritually for it. [Right]. So you would think I'd want to give more?

N: Well, I think our memories are very short, and much like the Israelites who kept experiencing God's blessing - Guess what? They went back and did the exact same thing: pushed Him aside - went for other idols and other things continuously. So I think we're the same way. Our memory is very short, and that's why it's good to come back to the Bible daily. And remember God's grace, and remember His provision for us.

Well, Arnie, when a follower of Christ acts in generosity, what do you think that says about Christ, and how have you seen this played out?

A: Yeah. You know, Christ gave it all. I mean, He gave his life; He died on the cross. He offered us eternal life and we're to be like Him. And that is something that you do daily. And the toughest thing for me about grace is, it's not logical. It's just - and the more you think it out - it just doesn't make sense. And I remember as a new believer, I hung out with some guys that were on fire for the Lord, and this one guy he would, every time we'd see a homeless person - and which was often in LA - he would take out his wallet, we'd stop, and he'd give him 10 bucks, or whatever. We'd go down the road and here, he would do that. And to this day, I haven't been convicted like that. But one thing I learned from him as a new believer, this grace thing is not logical. It wasn't logical that Jesus saved me; died and saved me. And it's certainly not logical - this guy going and giving people grace, if you will - it's pretty interesting.

N: Well, it's amazing the impact that it had on you, because you saw it, and you'll never forget it. And I have no doubt that impacts your giving today. And I'd have to say, that when we are generous with our time and our treasure and our talents, people will notice. And again, the goal is not for us to be celebrated, or for us to get a pat on the back. It is to point out the difference that Christ is making in our lives. So let's shift the focus just a little bit. And regardless of what someone's government or politics are about, what is it about Christian giving, that surpasses anything you might receive from your government?

C: Well, it's eternal. I would say it comes from a place of love, and you're not expecting anything in return. So nothing is going to be exchanged.

A: It's not deserved. That's probably my biggest thing.

N: Yup. Again, it's all about grace. And again, it comes out of the outflow of the heart, right? I mean, a government will, you know, create policies, and standards, and systems in place, and it's mandated. And again, there's no joy in that, but rather when a Christian gives, it is that it's a blessing, and it's a privilege, to be able to give out of what God's given us. So maybe that's another piece of that difference.

You know, it's easy to picture a wealthy believer, helping those with monetary needs, but how can believers of less financial means, supply the needs of those who have more than enough money?

A: I don't think God has like a balance sheet, and you have so much money in, and then he wants to know; you know, I just, I don't think it works that way at all. I think it's a heart thing. And if you have a lot, or whether you have a little, it's where your heart is, and if you begrudgingly do things, or do things out of habit, it's so noted. I think it's all a part of the heart.

C: Yeah. I would absolutely agree with that. And we have bestowed certain gifts, and I think that we use those, and some people are really generous with their time, and they think about other people more so than I do. They set a standard that I have a hard time getting to, but I try. But like I said earlier, experiences; using those gifts to bless others, you know. It could look like childcare, fixing things for somebody, you know, painting, making meals, those types of things, that I sit here and say, I'll do, but don't do that much.

N: Right. Well, we have to remember also what James says in James 1:17. You know, if we remember that *every good gift and every perfect gift is from above*, comes from God, the Father, but also it really - at the end of the day - money doesn't save anybody. Right? In fact, James even talks about that again in James 1:11 - he says that, *For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits*. What James is saying there, is money isn't going to save anybody. The rich get cancer; the poor get cancer, right? The rich have trials; the poor have trials. So the money isn't going to make any difference. We, as the body of Christ, can serve people in such a variety of ways, and to give freely of what God's given us. So look for the everyday ways to meet the needs of those around us, far more than just monetary issues. And also, let's use that as a way to engage with people who are far from God, so that they can see the difference that Christ has made in us.