

**Wednesday, July 29, 2020**

**SERIES: CHARACTER OVER COMPROMISE**

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**TITLE: Stewardship Pt. 3 (of 4)**

I'm not sure if you are into gardening, but most years, I have a pretty robust vegetable garden. I plant tomatoes, and peppers, and watermelon, and eggplant, and zucchini, and a variety of other plants. But there's one thing I know for certain about gardening. You reap what you sow.

I don't care how many times I have planted tomato seeds. Each time I plant them, I always get tomatoes. You never hear about people planting pepper seeds and getting pumpkins. You don't read about people planting watermelon seeds and getting rutabagas. It's because the principle is true in gardening, and it's true in life. What you reap is what you sow.

What difference does it make what we sow? That is exactly what we're going to talk about today and tomorrow.

Here we are closing out our series called Character Over Compromise. Each one of us has the opportunity to choose character or compromise. Every day we have opportunities to follow God or follow ourselves. Every day we have the opportunity to point people to Jesus or point people away from our King. We've talked through a variety of topics, such as honoring our promises, worship, and this week, we're talking about stewardship. This week we're looking at Second Corinthians 8 and 9. The last two days, we looked at Second Corinthians 8. Well, we discovered there is a group of Macedonian churches who experienced great persecution and great poverty. And yet, they were giving above and beyond their means. Not only that, they were giving joyfully, not out of compulsion, but eagerly out of love.

The question is, why? Why would these churches give, when they had so little? Why would they give away what they had begged to earn? Why would they think of others, when their lives are torn apart by persecution? The simple answer, as we saw yesterday, is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ became poor, though He was rich. Now that didn't mean that Jesus was a wealthy, earthly king, and He gave his money away and became poor. What it means is, that Jesus is God in the flesh. He always has been, and He always will be. And because He loved His creation, He would take the form of a servant. He would become flesh, and He would experience every discomfort that we experience, and He would even experience discomfort, to the point of death on the cross. Why? So we might live! He would subdue his divine abilities and become poor, so we who were spiritually poor, might become spiritually rich.

These churches realized that they were recipients of God's grace. The real blessing is not financial blessing. The best grace is not financial grace. The best grace is God's grace through the gift of Salvation. And through that gift, God had promised to meet all of their needs. So they

could give away freely what they had, because they knew their true riches were in Heaven, and their earthly needs would be met. And that leads us to the topic of sowing and reaping. Let's pick it up in Second Corinthians Chapter 9, beginning in verse six (ESV):

<sup>6</sup>The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

This is one of those passages that is pretty self-explanatory; however, I think people misinterpret pieces of it. Maybe you know that Back to the Bible is based in Lincoln, Nebraska, a city surrounded by a lot of rural areas. Farming is a major component of our state's economy. Even if you go downtown to the State capitol building, on top of the capitol is a sower. So this idea of sowing and reaping is very familiar to us here. So just like a farmer scatters seed – the harvest is in relation to his sowing. So again, as I began with when you sow tomato seeds, you get tomatoes. When you sow pepper seeds, you reap peppers. If I sow a couple pepper seeds, I get a couple plants. But if I scatter hundreds or thousands of seeds, I get hundreds and thousands of plants.

Again, this isn't really hard to understand. It's a general truth. The same is true in the area of money. If I put a large amount of money in the bank, guess what? My dividends will increase. Theoretically, the larger amount of money I invest in mutual funds, or real estate, or you name the investment, over time, we will reap more if we invest more. So again, we understand the concept, but the problem is how this passage can be twisted.

Today there are prosperity preachers, who will say that God wants you to have the biggest house, the nicest car, the most amount of money in the bank. And they'll say the reason you don't have these things is that you're not giving as you should. Or maybe it's because you're not asking Him as you should. If you can find the concept that God wants health, wealth, and prosperity for you in the Bible, I'll take you to lunch. You name the place; I'll take you to it. But I know that's a safe bet, because you won't find this concept in the Bible.

This passage has nothing to do with giving to get. And that's the twisting that happens. They will say, you give to this church or you give to this ministry, and God will return it exponentially. You want the bigger house, just give us some money. You want a nicer car; give us some money. That's not at all what this passage teaches.

You see, the Corinthian church had a deficiency in their giving. The other Macedonian churches were joyful givers. But the Corinthian church had not turned that way yet, so Paul has been teaching about the believers in Macedonia who were joyful givers, despite the circumstances. They were sowing as much as they could, and they were reaping spiritually, proportionately.

When we invest in the Kingdom of God with the right motives, we don't need to worry about it, just like a farmer doesn't plant seed, come back in, and say, "What have I done? What have I done?" He knows his sowing is going to produce a harvest. When we give back to God joyfully, and of first priority, as Paul talked about in Chapter 8, we will reap the harvest. Paul writes here, bountifully - This is the word that we get the word eulogy from – It means blessing. We will receive blessings from God, both in the life now, and the life to come. That does not mean, for a

dollar in, we get a dollar out. But for sure, there are blessings from God, based on our willingness to invest in the Kingdom of God.

## **DISCUSSION:**

N: Let's go to Cara and Arnie for a moment and talk about the blessings of a generous life. Arnie, what are some of the blessings you've experienced?

A: Oh, my goodness - being a Christ follower has been the most awesome thing. And the generosity of Christ followers - to me as a fellow believer, both as a new believer, and then in times of crisis, you know, it's not just monetary; it's the prayer. It's all kinds of things. I remember when as a - I think I'd been a Christ follower for about three years - I was in intensive care in the hospital for like a month. And all these people prayed for me. And back then, they had what was called a bulletin. My name was in the bulletin, and it was like, "Holy cow, either these people have nothing to do, or they're really concerned about me, Mister Loser". And just from that, you know, and then we had this fire at our equestrian ministry, and people just showed up out of the woodwork. It was tremendous how God's people are.

N: I did want to point out, that Cara and I did notice the fact that you did not bring up our names in your list of blessings.

C: Actually, Nat, you know what I thought of: in the movie, *The Jerk*, when he got his name in the phone book. ["David R. Johnson - I'm a somebody now"]. "I'm a somebody now."

A: That's right. That's right. I made the bulletin. [Mr. Loser, Mr. Loser]. I made the bulletin. I made the bulletin.

N: "I'm a somebody now". Well, you know, what's interesting is, as you talked about that experience, it brought back a memory. I think I haven't thought about it forever, but when our son was going through - when he was diagnosed with cancer -one of the ministries our family reached out to, is Back to the Bible, to pray for the healing of our son. And we even had a follow-up. I don't remember who it was, who called us back, you know, a few months after, but someone here at Back to the Bible called and said, "Hey, we've been praying for your son. How's it going?" And, through that process, we got to experience the blessing of the power of prayer through a ministry. And that was Back to the Bible, so pretty amazing blessing from the body of Christ. Something I think a lot of people wonder about is giving, and what to consider when giving. So Cara, I'd like to know from you, what do you consider when you give to a ministry or a cause?

C: I look at their theology first, because I don't want to support anything that doesn't line up with what God wants, or that's against what the Bible says. And then I look how they spend their money, so needs versus wants. Basically, do I trust them? So that's really what I look for, is theology.

N: I think that really does matter, because a lot of people they'll give to a cause, but they don't look at what's going on in the background. Like you said, are they trustworthy? And does what

they stand for - does it match what I believe? I think that we should all consider that in our giving. Great counsel.

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How do our motives matter when it comes to giving? Why do they make a difference? Paul gives us the answer in 2 Corinthians 9:7:

<sup>7</sup>Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

This is a very familiar verse, isn't it? So let's take a little bit of time and unpack it. Paul says every person, who is a follower of Christ, should give as he has decided in his heart. Paul reminds us that giving is to be voluntary, not out of compulsion. It is to be what the heart desires, not a set percentage by someone else. Now there's nothing wrong with organizations giving a suggestion or telling what the need is. But our giving is the outflow of God's grace to us. Because God loved us, He has poured His grace out upon us. And we know that His grace will overflow.

Paul says that *he has decided* or, as the New American Standard version says, *purposed*. This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament, but it means predetermined. We know that there is joy in just giving as the need arises. My wife is quite good at this. I don't know if she ever goes through a drive-thru or goes to a coffee shop without paying for someone else's food or drink. She loves that spontaneous grace.

And we are also called to give accordingly to a plan or systematically. You can find this in 1 Corinthians 16. I used to be, I think, a little more spontaneous, but I like plans. When I go on a trip, I'd like to know what restaurants I'm going to eat at and what time we're going to places. I don't know why; I just do. This is also true in giving. So I appreciate that, when someone says, "Hey, here is a specific need. Here is the opportunity. Take some time to pray about it; talk about it with your spouse and let us know". Or, be systematic about it. Now, this doesn't mean we go on autopilot. We should carefully consider it, and be intentional with our giving. So is it OK to be on a planned giving schedule at church, or here at Back to the Bible, or for whatever ministry? Yes, of course, it is. It just needs to be out of the right motive, and not approached with indifference.

Paul also said, don't do it reluctantly. The Greek word *lupe* literally means sorrowful, or full of grief, or painful. Now yes, we know that giving is to be sacrificial. We totally get that. In other words, it is supposed to keep us dependent upon God, and to show that we trust Him with our finances and our lives. But we shouldn't do it begrudgingly. We shouldn't do it in a way that's like, I'm going to give it, and then you pull the money back, and then you kind of put it forward again, and you pull it back. It's not like you're in this inner wrestling and torment, of all, "This is the worst decision ever". No, no, no. We are to give with no regret or reluctance or even mourning.

And again, Paul says, don't do it out of compulsion. In other words, don't do it to avoid punishment. Don't do it just because you think you should. No - God is asking us to give because

we recognize His grace and because we love Him. That's why Paul ends verse 7 by saying, *God loves a cheerful giver*. The Greek word here for cheerful is *hilaros*. We get the word hilarious from it. When we give away our treasure with the right motives, it should bring that much joy. It's happy, even celebratory. Because when we give from the benevolence of God, we recognize it's not a duty. It's a pleasure.

Who is the happiest giver that you know? There are those people who have the gift of giving. They love to meet needs. They love just to bless people. I know several people who fit this description, but I don't know of anyone who beats my mother. My mother is always thinking of other people. She is always giving away out of her abundance, and out of her deficit. And she loves doing it. I think at times she loves it too much, especially when she'll maybe buy me a shirt, or my kids a shirt, and it's not quite the right style. But there is so much joy and laughter when she gives. That's what God says brings Him joy: when we give grace freely with joy.

And then Paul ties it all together so neatly in verse eight.

<sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

So you see what puts the bow on it? The bow is the fact that God has power. That's why He says *able*. It's power. The root is actually the word we get the word dynamite from. Think about the explosive power dynamite has. It's saying *God has the power to make all overflowing grace abound to you*. It's to bring up the imagery of overflowing. It's like asking for water, and instead of stopping when the water hits the rim, the water just keeps going. You can sow bountifully, because God has the power to keep pouring out exactly what you need.

According to God, when we are willing to give cheerfully out of the outflow of our heart, the result is all sufficiency, in all things, at all times. You see, when we give to God's Kingdom, we don't have to worry about the harvest. God says, *I've got it. I have the power. You will have an all-sufficiency; Not independent of me, but because of me, you have exactly what you need; and not on occasion, not intermittently – No, at all times*. As Pastor John MacArthur said, "God graciously replenishes what they give, so that they lack nothing; he will continuously provide the generous giver with the means of further expressing that generosity."

We do not give to get. We do not give to get rich. God replenishes our tanks, so that we will abound in every good work. You see, we don't give to get a bigger car or a bigger house. We give, so that every good work may abound. When we live for the things that matter, the harvest and the legacy will never rust and never run out.

That is the kind of investment that we should desire most.

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N: Let's turn now to Arnie Cole and Cara Whitney for more perspective on what it means to invest in God's Kingdom. Cara, how have you learned about giving over the years? How has it changed you?

C: Personally, giving has never been anything that I've struggled with. So even before I entered into relationship with Jesus, I was a generous person, but I would say that now though, I use my

giving as a means to glorify God. So that's super important to me. I think it's super important to God, to glorify Him. It's not mine. So I found that there's a great peace that comes, if you live with your hand open, and you allow God to take out what He chooses, and then He will put in what he chooses.

N: Great illustration. I love the imagery of an open hand. Arnie, what about you as CEO of Back to the Bible? Can you tell us a little bit about the history of our ministry and why it exists today? I mean, 81 years after it all began?

A: Yeah. And it's really all been supported by mainly Christ followers that are of average means, who believe in getting the Word out, getting people engaged in Scripture. For 81 years, first radio, now digital platforms, podcasts, but by and large, our backbone is Christ followers and their generosity. And one thing I think that has been very characteristic of Back to the Bible, is we always step out in faith. You know, "We ain't got no money, honey". And that's the idea, you know. It's one thing to step out in faith, when you have millions of dollars in your trust fund, or in your - you know, how these old time ministries have been able to say; it's another thing to step out in faith, when you've got one month of operating, and you know, and we have a thing around here historically, you know, do you step out in faith, or are you stepping out in foolishness? And really those kinds of trials, really I've seen shape us as a ministry.

N: Okay. So I want to press that, because I think a lot of people struggle with that. How do we at Back to the Bible distinguish between stepping out in faith and stepping out in foolishness?

A: For me, I know that Jesus owns it all. So this is what He's granted you to work with this year. And you know, if you don't do anything, you're foolish. If you try harder than you did last year, it's not going to make any difference, because it's not about how hard you work, or works. It's just about your faith and what you're willing to commit to, to step out of the boat, walk on the water, and yeah, you may sink.

N: And I think you're right. Sometimes you look back six months, three months, a year later - we can kind of go back and reevaluate - but there's one thing that you didn't comment on. And I'd like to bring it up for our listeners to know, is that with you as our leader, you're really good at bringing in the team too. Your seeking godly counsel is what you do, whether it's from the board that we have, or to the executive team, or the team of Back to the Bible as a whole, you're always saying, "Here's what we're thinking about. What do you think? And let's pray about it." And I think that is a key element in that difference between faith and foolishness. You're not just going blindly. No, you are seeking counsel, godly counsel, and carefully evaluating the opportunities before us. And I think that speaks to your leadership. And I know God is blessing that.

Now I'd like to hear from both of you: who was the happiest giver you've ever known, and tell us a little bit about them?

C: My friend's husband is the first person I thought of. You might know him, Nat, Chris Brester. [Oh sure.] He owns and operates a construction company here in Lincoln. And he is super purposeful on how he reflects Jesus to his employees, is very generous, and he stands out, because he's so generous. And he runs his company, I think, from an outside perspective,

differently. And so Jesus lives inside of his heart and it's obvious by his actions. Plus he's very jovial and a little bit portly. So he's my pic for happiest giver, but I have a lot of really generous friends, and they give their time and their finances.

N: Yeah. Chris is a good guy. I've been able to travel the globe with him. And he is very jovial and I won't talk about his size. So moving on from that, what about you Arnie?

A: You know, I think as I look back, there've been several very, very generous people. I would have to say, and I really thought he was crazy at the time, was my dad. You know, we were Quakers. When you were raised that way, you never talked about money. My dad sold his dental practice and they went to Indonesia and started a dental school, and just gave and gave and gave, refused to do interviews, refused any of the accolades of doing philanthropy. And just - it was a happy guy just doing what God had to say, and was a very generous giving person, with never any strings attached.

N: And that's the best kind of giving.