

Next to our house, and just to the left of our garage door, are two very small little hand indentions forever imprinted in the concrete of our driveway. They are the handprints of both our children when they were living at home with us. Now if you were to ask either of them, "How much did you contribute to the family when you were living there?" I'm pretty sure neither one of them would start "tooting their own horn." Not because they were trying to avoid self praise, but because they, like all of us, don't usually see or understand our significance in the shadow of what we aspire or hope to be.

As a matter of fact, a lot of us, like children, will walk over to our little memorials, the handprints by the corner of the house and say, "See those handprints; that's the impression I made." The problem is that we are asking the wrong people. If you were to ask their mother or me that same question, there would not be time enough in our day to cover everything we know about how our children have contributed to the growing and building of our family.

Of course, then you would be saying to us, "Oh look at the time!"

Let's Pray

Those little handprints seem small and almost insignificant to most anyone else. Oh sure, they're cute and they can provide a novelty when you get to compare them to the size of my children's hands now. But I believe the reason we do things like this is that it creates not just a memory, but also an indelible anchor point to the presence of one's life in that moment in time.

So why is this so important for generosity? I mean, that is our theme for this week, right? But what does this have to do with being generous?

Let's dig into our Scripture. There's this interesting story that basically unfolds in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. However, surrounding this story in the rest of Paul's letter both before and after, there's this one-sided conversation that Paul is having with the members of the church. If you read between the lines, you start to get this feeling that there is so much more that is going on besides just the words.

To give a little background, Luke tells us in Chapter 11 of Acts that, right around the time that Paul is writing this 2nd letter to the Corinthians, a severe famine has begun to ravage the countryside surrounding Jerusalem. So Paul and many of the other church leaders rallied the outlying churches to pull together their resources and provide an aid offering to the people in and around Jerusalem.

Apparently, this idea caught on like wildfire and soon churches from all over were starting to join in on this collective relief effort; all of the churches, that is, except Corinth.

Now, I must remind you that Corinth and the people of Corinth lived pretty well. It was a thriving city in Paul's day, and there was really no lacking for resources.

So anyway, to more or less keep up with this "generosity fervor" that was going around the Christian community, Corinth apparently also pledges their support to Paul and the other church leaders saying, "Yes, we want to be a part of this, Jerusalem Aid Project."

However, now almost a year has gone by. Apparently, they've collected from all of the other churches, but nothing has come out of Corinth. So Paul writes this letter, and you immediately notice that there's a little bit of "history" here between Paul and the people who make up the church of Corinth.

2 Corinthians 8:10-11

So here's what I think: The best thing you can do right now is to finish what you started last year and not let those good intentions grow stale. Your heart's been in the right place all along. You've got what it takes to finish it up, so go to it.

However, there was a problem. It wasn't that the Corinthians were procrastinators. You see, along with being affluent, they were also privy to some of the most prominent thinkers and speakers of their day. The prosperity gospel was not an unfamiliar theme.

The problem was that Corinth had replaced generosity with a will to control. There is no doubt that Corinth knew, regarding the financial aid to Jerusalem, that they probably were by far the largest donors in the mix. So it is quite possible that they also knew that this might be their opportunity to leverage a few things their way.

One big thing was Paul himself. There was no overlooking the fact that some of the members of Corinth thought Paul was not qualified or distinguished enough hold any authority over their church. You can almost imagine their little board meetings going something like this:

"Ok we have this issue of the famine in Jerusalem. What are we going to do about that?"

"Oh, wow, I'm new to this board, but I think I remember voting on this at church about a year ago. Didn't we have a unanimous vote on that?"

"Yes we did, but then remember we wanted to make sure that the transfer and distribution of those funds was on the up and up."

“Okay, but has there been any problems in the past that would cause alarm?”

“Well there is the issue with Paul. We’re not completely convinced of his credentials. I mean, he *is* a common laborer.”

“Yes, and I’ve not been overly excited about his letters, especially that last one! Like who made him judge over me? I have to say, I’m not impressed, and I feel like sometimes his preaching is down right boring.”

“Okay, so what does all that have to do with this gift to the church in Jerusalem?”

“Well, in light of all that has happened, can we really trust Paul? We just feel as though we could have a greater pull in getting a few things changed around here if we just leverage this gift a little.”

“Yes, I vote we table this again for next month.”

Paul knows this is going on in Corinth, So what does Paul do with all this uncertainty and harsh criticism about his leadership? He moves on, knowing full well that this could turn into a battle where the worst of the collateral damage would be the church being distracted and losing focus on their mission.

Listen to his words as he tries to prepare them to loosen their grip on trying to control and manipulate for their own gain.

2 Corinthians 6:

Dear, dear Corinthians, I can’t tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn’t fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren’t small, but you’re living them in a small way. I’m speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively!

Paul then goes down a road that all of them understood. He shares with them how generous God is—how Christ lowered himself into humanity so that he could rescue us. But this generous gift was not so that he could leverage it to manipulate or control us. Actually, just the opposite; his generosity flows out of a desire to have the very best for us.

It never really says whether or not the Corinthians actually fulfilled their commitment to the pledge, but we do know that the Christian church continued on in Jerusalem and, if the Corinthians really did miss out on this pledge, it would be much more their loss than that of victims of the famine. When generosity is done with a cheerful heart, everyone is connected, everyone is touched, and everyone is benefited.

There's quite a bit of excitement around the Cinquemani house these days. As my wife mentioned a couple of weeks ago, my son and his girlfriend Alyssa Cotter got engaged. So now the planning begins, the coordinating, the reserving, the shopping, the taste testing, the hours spent on Pinterest and on the phone with moms, dads, cousins, old friends and new friends. All so that this wedding, their wedding, can be as wonderful as they always hoped and dreamed it might be.

It's fun to see my son, who up until now was usually a passive onlooker for events such as these. I now see him active and involved in the plans and the ideas for what this wedding will look like.

Just this last week, they came over to our house, and we spent an evening cutting out designs and making boxes. I thought to myself, why are they doing all of this? Who is it really for? Isn't this their wedding? Shouldn't someone somewhere else be doing this for them? But then there's that word "Generous." From the heart they pour over these details as if they were going to have to pass an inspection somewhere. They do it not because it makes them look good, but because they want their day to be as special for everyone else as it is for them.

In Revelation, we read about this same type of preparation: God calls us his bride. He, too, is going to great lengths to make sure that everything is as it should be. But unlike us, he has no limit to his wedding budget. He's invited the universe, and they are all coming. Can you imagine the wedding meal? Can you imagine the wedding gifts?

As you enter into this wedding, you realize that everything the bride has and everyone who's there are there because of the generosity of God. It is the ultimate connecting ceremony, and finally through this generosity, we will be connected.

We've heard it before: "God loves a cheerful giver" – but this was not so that pastors could leverage people into giving and being happy about it. No, God was simply trying to help us realize that, when we live our lives out in the spirit of generosity, we begin to connect with heaven and the way his Kingdom works.

A few months ago, my granddaughter, Adeyn, and I were going outside to play on the swing. As we rounded the corner of the house, she noticed for the first time those handprints of her uncle and her mother. She bent down to look closer; I could tell she was wondering what they were about.

"That is your mommy's hand print when she was a little girl," I explained.

"Oh," she said as she stared intently.

And then she quietly and almost reverently, reached down and placed her hand inside the imprint of her mothers.

She looked up at me and said, "It's just like mine."

It was like an eclectic jolt had just gone through my body. It was as if I was seeing a legacy unfold right in front of me.

Adelyn has no idea the incredible contribution she has made and will continue to make in this family. What she gives is simply a natural result of the connection she has with those who love her.

The generous life we are called to live is simply a natural result of the connection we have with an extravagantly generous God and the grace-filled Gospel of love made possible by Jesus Christ.



February 4, 2017

1. The more we discover and understand how much we've been given, one might think that this would automatically cause us to be generous. What might get in the way of this happening?
2. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul was quite clear that they had the wrong idea about generosity. They were holding back on their gifts so they could use it as leverage for control and power. In what ways do you see that happening in your own experience?
3. What event or celebration comes to mind where you and everyone with you was connected through the joy and blessing of generosity?
4. Regarding generosity, when we speak about going above and beyond what is expected in the area of serving, ministering or caring, we are fairly comfortable. However, as soon as we start talking about money, why does it somehow get just a little uncomfortable?



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