

God's Stimulus Plan

II Corinthians 9:6-11

1) This is week five and our last message in the series of 5 practices of fruitful congregations. I've enjoyed this series even more than I anticipated. It has been a timely focus for us as a congregation that I hope has been helpful to each of you personally.

I'm probably like my mother. She thinks that I preach well every Sunday. She, of course, is prejudiced. But, part of the joy I have had comes from realizing how well you do these 5 practices. I think you are a great congregation that already embodies the practices we have talked about –

- Radical Hospitality
- Passionate Worship
- Intentional Faith Development
- Risk-taking Mission and Service

Today we come to the last of the 5 practices – Extravagant Generosity. Here again, it was an act of extravagant generosity when you gave the gift of a new church to a poor congregation in Uganda. I do think that across the board, Mt. Auburn is the most generous congregation I have ever seen – certainly the most generous congregation I have ever been a part.

2) It is God's will for us that we live generous lives. From Genesis to Revelation, we not only read of the instructions to bring our tithes and offerings but to do it with a generosity of spirit. As Paul wrote so clearly to the believers at Corinth:

"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (II Corinthians 9:7)

a. In Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, he is talking about extravagant generosity when he boasts about the church in Macedonia. He celebrates how God's grace has worked in their lives to the point that they are eager to participate in this larger work of God even out of their poverty. Paul says,

"For during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." (II Corinthians 8:2)

b. Churchill said,

“We make a living by what we get but a life by what we give.”

c. Those who have given of themselves are the shoulders we stand on today. A history of such generosity is the foundation for every church in the land. The original and universally accepted formula has been the tithe. The foundation for tithing is the biblical principle that since all things come from God, all things belong to God. God claims only 10% for God’s work leaving 90% for His people.

3) There are many generous people in this congregation who practice tithing faithfully, and have found God to be faithful to His promises to meet all of our needs. But, the 5th practice of fruitful congregations is not generosity, but *extravagant generosity*. Is it possible to be generous, and still not meet the level of extravagant generosity? When we are talking about extravagant generosity, Scripture puts the emphasis on something other than just the amount that is given.

a. Let me illustrate: Warren Buffet has pledged to give away 85% of his wealth. That is a heck of a lot more than a tithe. But, does it meet the standard of extravagant generosity? Well, in the end, Warren Buffet will still have 6.5 billion dollars to live on. Somehow, I think he will manage to scrimp by.

b. On the other hand, Jesus extols the faith of a poor widow who gives two almost worthless coins to the Temple because it was all she had. The widow’s offering was extravagant because to give what she gave required complete trust that God would somehow care for her situation. It required a trust that somehow she would find enough food the next day and the next week, so as not to starve.

Warren Buffet is generous. There is no denying that, but the poor widow is the one who embodies extravagant generosity. She is not going to let her poverty define or limit her but instead uses her generosity to express her confidence in God’s will and gratitude for God’s reign.

4) Webster defines extravagant as “exceeding the limits of reason or necessity; going beyond what is justifiable; lacking in moderation, balance or restraint.” In so doing this poor widow mirrors and models the extravagant love of God for his creatures and creation.

Extravagant is something out of the ordinary, something that takes your breath away, causing you to say, "Wow!" Extravagant Generosity refers to sharing and giving that exceeds all expectations.

- Extravagant generosity is found in the woman who took the expensive perfume and used it to anoint Jesus' feet.
- Extravagant generosity is the Good Samaritan rescuing the injured traveler and paying for his lodging, his food, and his medical care.
- Extravagant generosity is the lad who gave his sack lunch for Jesus to bless and feed 5,000 with 12 baskets of food left over.
- Christ telling Peter to put out his net, and so many fish are caught that the net is breaking and the boat about to sink – that's extravagant generosity.
- Jesus taking the towel and basin and washing the feet of his disciples – that's extravagant generosity.
- When we consider the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see in Him extravagant generosity. Jesus Christ is the one who gave His entire life on the cross as an extravagantly generous gift to us.

5) Ultimately, extravagant generosity is not so much about our money, as it is about our heart. It is not so much about supporting this church, as it is about doing the Kingdom-building work of Jesus Christ. It is about expressing our faith through money, time, love and prayers.

- Now, if money talks, what does our management of it say about us and about where we place our ultimate trust and security?

Sometimes in the church we think and act as though God is poor. We feel that we have to protect God's resources because they may run out. God is not poor. He has all the resources in the world. Of course, He has given them to us, so are we protecting God or trying to protect ourselves when we think and act this way?

- Remember the question should always be, "What is God calling us to do?" Not, "What resources do we have?"
- When we are considering a new program, don't ask, "How much will it cost?" But rather first ask: "How many will it reach?"

6) The resurrection of Jesus Christ frees us to do more with our lives than protect them. It frees us to offer them. Let's not be so concerned about our seating capacity either in this room or a sanctuary we may build, and let's be a lot more concerned about our sending capacity – how many people can we send out to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons?

a. Here is the core of the issue: do we devote ourselves to accumulation or to giving. Paul encourages the church in Corinth to **"excel in the grace of giving."** (II Corinthians 8:7)

If Paul were here today he might say he wants to believers to live with "extravagant generosity."

b. Extravagant Generosity changes us and it also changes churches. Just as individuals, churches can become focused on themselves, selfish, self-centered and self-absorbed. The lack of Extravagant Generosity is a recipe for decline and death for a church.

c. Extravagant Generosity helps us to reflect on the nature of God. It is out of our overwhelming sense of thankfulness that we seek to bless others. This is the life that God calls us to. When we live generous lives, we become more thoughtful, more caring, more compassionate people. We become more focused on making a difference for Christ. This is why "growing in the grace of giving" must be an intentional part of our Christian journey.

7) When Jesus said,

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

(Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:34)

He is saying that how we spend our money and resources reveals what kind of people we are, but it will also determine what kind of people we will become.

a. The church is where people say "yes" to God and to one another; Christ turns our water into wine; and people come to die and rise again in new life. At their best, God's people and churches over the centuries have embodied this practice and have poured themselves out in extravagance.

b. You ask, how can a church, or a person survive that keeps pouring themselves out into the world? That is a question for which I do not have an answer. This is God's stimulus program. I don't know how it works, but I know it always works!

- God has blessed Mt. Auburn above what any of us could have imagined. Who does not realize God has blessed us?
- I can remember when we were \$400 short of making a mortgage payment.
- Holes in the parking lot . . .

8) A lot of people think that all the church wants is their money. Maybe some of you feel that way, too. This is an oft-repeated reason people give for not attending church. Money is the source of most of the negative people say about the church.

It wasn't always this way. Read Acts 2 about the life of the believers in the just emerging church.

"All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved." (Acts 2:44-47)

Notice how they enjoyed the "good will of all the people."

I was reading that some time back and was struck by an idea. We all have too much stuff. What if we had yard sales across this county to get rid of our stuff – the only stipulation being that we give the money to the poor? Maybe people will look differently at the church again.

9) Researchers at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke in Bethesda, Maryland, wanted to find the neurological basis for unselfish generous acts. They actually studied the brains of 19 volunteers who were choosing whether to give money to charity or to keep it for themselves. They used a standard technique to map the activity of the various parts of the brain. The results were reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The conclusion was that the persons who elected to hold on to the money they were given and use it for themselves did not demonstrate the brain activity in the reward center of the brain of those who donated generously. Thus the warm glow that accompanies charitable giving has a physiological basis.

All this medical research only underlines what Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35)

10) I hope, in the weeks ahead, you'll think deeply about extravagant generosity. And my prayer is that more and more of us may discover that, yes, it is more blessed to give than to receive. A spirit of extravagant generosity will transform your life.

