

Hey everyone, my name is Tom and I serve as one of the pastors here at The Creek. I want to welcome those who are normally part of our Shelby Street or Franklin Road campuses, and say a special welcome to those who are newer or joining us for the first time. I'm excited to get to share with you from God's word today!

Maybe you saw this story a few weeks ago of a husband and wife fishing on a lake in Wisconsin. They were on their way to their favorite fishing spot when they saw a baby bear swimming in the water with a bucket stuck on its head. Suddenly their focus shifted from fishing, to rescuing this bear. So, they pulled their boat up next to the bear, reached down, and pulled the bucket off the bear's head, making sure it swam away to safety.

Sometimes situations come up that shift our focus back to what really *matters*.

And that's what we've seen in this season of quarantine and isolation, financial stress, racial tension, political uncertainty, and overall social exhaustion - certain things matter! Two weeks ago, Dan and Darnell did a great job explaining from God's word why *equality* matters. Last week Eric reminded us why *community* matters. And this week we get to talk about why *generosity* matters.

So, what I'd like to do in our time together is explore four obstacles we might face to generosity, and then, given our current social climate, suggest four opportunities we have to live generously. Four obstacles, and four opportunities. And we'll see many of these from just a few verses found in 2 Corinthians chapter 9, starting in verse 6.

Now while you're turning to 2 Corinthians 9, here's a bit of context. A man named Paul, who once persecuted Christians, is now a follower of Jesus. He started a church in a town called Corinth, and this is his second letter to the church there (thus the name 2nd Corinthians). In this section of his letter, Paul commends the church for their recent generosity towards others, and is encouraging them to keep it up.

That's what's happening as we pick up in 2 Corinthians 9:6. Paul wrote, "Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." Right away we see the first obstacle we might face to generous living: sometimes we struggle with a *scarcity mindset*.

Paul contrasts two approaches a farmer could take to sowing seed in a field. A hesitant or scarcity approach with the seed, which leads to a smaller harvest. And a generous approach, which leads to a greater harvest.

If you need a recent example of a scarcity mindset, think back just a few months to when this pandemic became real and the lockdown happened. So many people flooded the grocery stores and bought up all the canned goods, pastas, and meats available. Aisle after aisle of empty shelves, and then of course, there was the mad dash for the last rolls of toilet paper and paper

towels. All the extreme preppers were sitting pretty with their 20-year supply of dehydrated food stored in their bunker, but the rest of us, to some extent, displayed a scarcity mindset.

So, where does that mindset come from? For me, I could look back to my childhood, growing up predominantly in a single parent home where we just didn't have much. I've struggled most of my life with a scarcity mindset - this fear of "will I have enough." And that certainly can affect my willingness to live generously. Maybe you can relate to a scarcity mindset from time to time.

Paul reminds the church in Corinth that if they have a scarcity mindset when they sow, their harvest will be small. But if they sow generously, their harvest will *always* be better.

Look at the next verse, 2 Corinthians 9:7. Paul continues, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Here's another obstacle we might face to living generously: a *reluctant heart*.

Back in January - which I know feels like forever ago - Dan walked us through our three-part mission as a church: to love God, love people, and make disciples; and then our singular vision: to connect people to Jesus. Then, for the next few weeks, we spent a week on each of our seven priorities, one of which is generosity.

And if you recall, Dan unpacked four levels of generous living:

- Level 1 - those who don't give at all.
- Level 2 - those who give meagerly or reluctantly.
- Level 3 - those who give obediently.
- Level 4 - those who give cheerfully.

Dan pointed out, and I think correctly, that our Creek family is filled with many people in that third category: those who give what they have obediently.

And honestly, that's not a bad place to be! The bible says to be generous, so we're going to be generous. And candidly, relative to other churches I know of, we're in a decent place, financially speaking, because of the faithfulness and obedience of individuals and families at The Creek. We have the lowest debt we've ever had, we've not had to lay off any staff like other churches have had to during this season, and we continue to support local and global ministry partners, all because of your faithful and obedient giving, and that's amazing.

But if we want to show the world the kind of generosity that truly reflects the heart of God AND points people to Jesus, it's that last level: cheerful generosity. That word, "cheerful" in verse 7, is where we get our English word *hilarious*. And so the challenge for the Corinthian church, and for us as part of the Creek family, is to move to that 4th level; *hilarious* generosity. The kind of generosity that brings extreme amusement and joy, both to one who receives, and the one who gives.

Let's keep going: 2 Corinthians 9:8 reads, "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

Friends, please hear this truth: God is a God of abundance, not scarcity. I'll say that again. Paul reminds this church that God is able to bless *abundantly*, and that word is written in the present tense, which means God can continually provide, at *all* times, so that we would always have what we need, to abound in every good work.

And if we look closely, this verse reveals yet another obstacle we might face to generous living: sometimes we confuse *what we need with what we want*.

Early on as a pastor, around 1996, I was driving a 1974 Toyota Corolla. It was our first car given to Laura and I by her grandparents. And I'll never forget a conversation I had with a man who worked at a Christian bookstore in Castleton. He saw me pull up, we started talking, I told him I was a pastor, and he essentially told me the reason I was driving such an old car was because I lacked faith. "If you really trusted in God," he said, "you could ask for a brand-new car, and God would give you one."

I walked away sad for that man, because he, like many others, had fallen prey to something called a "prosperity gospel." "Just believe, and everything you *want* will be yours." Friends, that's just not in the bible!

In fact, the verse we just read says that God will abundantly provide all we *need*, not all we *want*. And far too often we confuse the two. It's amazing how this works - when we're consumed with our wants, we never seem to have enough, and so how could we possibly live generously? Sharing what we have can't happen naturally when we're constantly consumed with acquiring more!

And when we stop, and realize that God has abundantly supplied, and will continue to supply, all we need, and we take stock in how much extra we actually have, we can and will live generously, sharing cheerfully, abounding in every good work God calls us too.

Sometimes we confuse *what we need, with what we want*.

One more obstacle we might face to the kind of generous living that points people to Jesus: Sometimes we have *selfish motives*.

Just a few verses later, in 2 Corinthians 9:11, we read that generosity will result in "thanksgiving to God." At the end of verse 12, Paul told the church their generosity was causing those they helped to "overflow in many expressions of thanks to God." And in verse 13 Paul wrote: "Because of your service...others will praise God." You see a pattern here? The ultimate goal of generosity is that God would be thanked and praised.

Yet it's sad to think how quickly even something like "generous living," which is supposed to be for others, so that God is praised, can turn into being about us.

Is it really possible that we're sometimes motivated to be generous so that:

We can feel accepted

We get attention and praise

Our desire to feel needed is met

We get something in return

Our good deed might cover or hide something we've done wrong

We've got to pause and ask some difficult questions here: do we believe, and show with our actions, that our God is a God of scarcity, or a God of abundance? Do we share what we have reluctantly, focusing on our *wants* and acquiring more, or do we share cheerfully, realizing we have way more than we *need*? And this is a tough one: do we, when we are generous, hope to bring glory and attention to ourselves, or do we seek to give glory and attention only to God?

Friends, generosity matters, perhaps now more than ever! And until we allow God to reveal and heal the broken places in our minds and hearts, we will continue facing these four obstacles to generous living.

Now, given our current social climate, what are four opportunities we have to live generously?

Well, the first one's pretty obvious: we have the opportunity to be generous with our resources - specifically, our *finances* and our *time*. Generosity mattered in Paul's day enough for him to take time and commend the Corinthian church for it, and your generosity has mattered to many individuals and families during this challenging season.

Since March, you've contributed \$110,000 dollars towards the generous ministry at The Creek - 100% of those funds go to help people in need. Since March, you've donated 20,000 pounds of food (10 TONS - that's incredible)! We've seen 111 volunteers step up and serve with food collection and distribution, providing meals to 230 local families. We had 75 volunteers from both Shelby Street and Franklin Road show up to serve at our Kidustrial Park drive-through for families. Several life groups stepped up with gift baskets to graduating seniors who missed out on the normal "pomp and circumstance." The student ministry provided gift baskets to the first responders on the scene at the recent car accident on Fry Road.

A young single mom, in the midst of a high-risk pregnancy, was laid off from her job. Generous funds helped her keep her bills paid so she could focus on the health of her unborn baby and the needs of her other children.

Two young couples that attend The Creek recently encountered some financial struggles. One couple lost both their jobs, the other had just started a business which abruptly closed due to the pandemic. The generous ministry was able to come alongside each couple and help them with what they needed.

Church family, your generosity has mattered! It's made an enormous difference!

And just as Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to keep up their generosity, as one of your pastors, I'm encouraging you to do the same: please continue to give cheerfully and sacrificially, knowing that God provides abundantly what we need, so we can share our extra with others.

Look for ways to continue to be generous: serve someone, by yourself, with your family, with your life group. Provide a meal to a family in need, offer yard work to someone who can't do it on their own. Volunteer with the food pantry, or one of our local ministry partners. A huge opportunity lies before us to live generously with our finances and our time.

Next, given our current social climate, we also have the opportunity to live generously with our *listening*.

During recent months season, a couple scriptures keep coming to mind. The first is James 1:19; it reads: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

If there's one thing we've learned that matters in this season, it's the need and value of listening. Listening to other's stories and experiences, seeking to understand what it's like to walk in another's shoes.

Recently I had breakfast with a friend who shared what it's like to be a family of mixed races. And I was shocked to hear the stories he told. I realized later how easily I can forget that just because I haven't had a particular experience, or would never act a certain way, it doesn't mean someone else's experience didn't happen or isn't real.

Friends, generous living with our "listening" requires humility to admit we don't know everything. Listening requires releasing our preconceived ideas and holding another person's story gently, without trying to fix or pronounce judgement.

Which reminds me of the second verse that's been swirling in my mind these past few months. Paul writes this in 2 Timothy 4:3 - and *wow* is this valid for us today: "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

We have so many biases when it comes to how we listen to people and information. Some of us over-rely on the first bit of information we hear, especially when it backs up a preconceived notion we have. Or we refuse to listen to stories or information we don't like, that make us uncomfortable, or might cause us pain.

And in our world of constant "breaking news" and major headlines changing every few hours, we don't know what to believe, or we grab onto the first thing that our "itching ears want to hear." Which is why generosity with our listening matters now more than ever, especially as followers of God. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way and the *truth* and the life." In John 17:17 Jesus is praying for his followers when he asks God: "Sanctify them by the truth; *your word* is truth."

Friends, this is a unique opportunity in history to be generous with our listening, making sure we filter everything we hear through the truth that is Jesus, and God's word. To be quick to listen and slow to speak, which brings us to our next opportunity for generosity.

Given our current social climate, we have the opportunity to be generous with our *words* - specifically the message of the good news of Jesus. Look back to 2 Corinthians 9:13. Paul wrote: "Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else."

What is the gospel message? You can remember it with five words: love, evil, rescue, choice, restore. God is *love* and created us to be in relationship with him. *Evil* entered the world when humanity decided to live apart from God. God made a way through Jesus to *rescue* us from the consequences of our sin. We have the *choice* to surrender to Jesus as our Savior and Lord. And if we do, God *restores* our broken relationship with him now, and while we wait for all of creation to be restored to its original design for eternity. Love, evil, rescue, choice, restore: that's the message people really need right now.

Friends, please hear me when I say this, with as much love and sincerity as possible: people right now don't need me, and they don't need you - they need Jesus! People don't need to hear your opinion or preference on social media, they need to hear the message of the gospel of Jesus!

Some of us need to be quiet, recognize our biases, and humbly listen, filtering everything through the truth of Jesus and God's word, and if God leads us to speak, or post something on social media, our words should *only* be the message of the gospel of Jesus.

I wonder, have we contributed to the current noise level and the chaos by doing the opposite of what James said? Have we been slow to listen and quick to speak, often in anger? Have we taken every opportunity to voice our own opinions and preferences, instead of the Gospel message? How much of the current noise would disappear, if we who profess to trust in the greatest message ever told, only responded with that message, the good news of Jesus.

Church family, we have the incredible opportunity before us to be generous - with our resources, with our listening, with our words about Jesus, and finally with our thanksgiving to God!

Paul wraps up this portion of his letter by sharing with the Corinthian church the response of those blessed by their generosity. Look at verse 14: "And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

I think this is the most important point Paul makes: from what does all sincere and effective opportunities of generosity overflow? A thankful heart - specifically a heart that is thankful for the grace of Jesus.

I love this quote by author and preacher John Ortberg. He wrote, “Gratitude is the ability to experience life as a gift. It opens us up to wonder, delight, and humility. It makes our hearts generous. It liberates us from the prison of self-preoccupation.”

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says to be “thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.”

This has been a difficult, long, and challenging season. A mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually exhausting season, and we’re not out of it yet. So now, more than ever, we need to make time to be with Jesus, thanking him for his grace in our lives.

For many of us, the best thing we can do is shut off the news, get off social media and take stock of all that we have to be thankful for. When you get up, as you’re getting ready, list five things you’re thankful for, try to come up with new things every day. Listen to worship music while you’re in the car or doing chores around the house. You can join the 1000+ people who subscribe, through our website, to the daily devotions we’re writing that coincide with the messages each week. Recently, I started watching a series about Jesus called “The Chosen” that’s free as a downloadable app on your phone, and I’ve naturally been more thankful to God as I’m reminded of the love and grace of Jesus.

We have to take every opportunity to be thankful to God for his indescribable gift, that he *is* a God of abundance, not scarcity. This in turn will help us be generous with our resources, with our listening, and our words - not reluctantly - but cheerfully.

And we get to put this into practice right as we get ready to take communion. The bible tells us that God so loved the world that he *generously gave* us Jesus to pay the price for our sins. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus didn’t give his life reluctantly, it literally says, “For the *joy set* before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” James 1:5 says that God gives wisdom *generously* to all who ask.

Friends, we worship, serve, and follow a loving and joyfully generous God who gave the best of what he had, his own son, to pay the price for our sins, and with his death and he gave us new life now, and for eternity through his resurrection. He did this so that we, with thankful hearts, could take every opportunity to live generously towards others, that they too might know and praise God!

Let’s take time now and thank God for his generous and indescribable gift of grace!