

## ***The Grace of Giving***

**Scripture Reading:** Mark 12:38-44

“Go faster!” my high school jazz band director urged me. “Play faster!”

He was encouraging me to be bolder and more adventurous as I improvised during a solo. I knew I wasn’t making beautiful music. I was fumbling around trying to find notes that fit the key, the tune, and the tempo. He wanted me to quit thinking about it so much and just go for it.



And he should know. After all, he’d played with some of the big bands, was friends with some of the big names in the business, and had developed many students over the years who launched into successful musical careers. But I was nervous. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself. And I knew that what I was doing on my trombone wasn’t close to being ready for primetime.

The problem, as I look back, is that he wasn’t asking me to be ready for primetime. He wasn’t suggesting that I cut a new record or move to New York to begin a musical career. He was just encouraging me to be all in and give it my best, bad as my best might be. My wife and her therapist colleagues call it, “dancing ugly.” You’ve got to do more than risk dancing ugly; you’ve got to just do it, dance ugly, if you want to get better at something.

In Second Corinthians 8 and 9, the Apostle Paul urges the Corinthians to follow through and give generously to their Christian brothers and sisters enduring hard times in Jerusalem. They’d started gathering an offering but hadn’t finished the job. I’m sure there were all kinds of good reasons they were holding back. But Paul urged the Corinthians to do this thing he knew they were capable of, to follow through until doing it became second nature. In the same way that my band director urged me to blow past, literally, my reservations and boldly play my trombone until improvising became natural for me, Paul wanted the Corinthians to go for it with their generosity until they excelled at it and it became a natural outflow of their new life in Christ.

The Apostle Paul writes, “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” (2 Corinthians 8:7 NIV). After all, Paul goes on to write in verse nine, this grace of giving, this outflow of generosity, was what Jesus modeled for us. Like a great musician modeling what great musicianship looks and sounds like, Jesus is the model of what we who follow him aspire to: “you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

Generosity is what a great Christian looks like, because it is what Christ looks like. Like improvisation for a jazz musician, generosity is a key characteristic of Jesus' disciples. No wonder Jesus points to a poor widow who only gives two small copper coins as his model of what it means to excel in this grace of giving. Like Jesus on the cross, when she put those two coins in the temple treasury she gave "everything she had, all she had to live on." Her example doesn't necessarily mean that every penny we own needs to go into the church's treasury, any more than the example of Jesus' death means we need to give up our lives on literal crosses. But the examples of both, make it clear that everything we have and are, little or much as that may be, is to be given to God and used to generously serve God's purposes in the world.

As the Corinthians did for a while, we may stumble at this at times and dance ugly on occasion. But we need to know that this grace of giving is what we are aiming for. Generosity is like great jazz improvisation, looking and sounding a bit different in various situations and alongside various partners. But, wow, is it beautiful! It flows from the heart and connects our hearts, encourages our spirits and those of others, and joins us together with the Spirit of God and the loving, generous work of God in the world.

**Prayer:**

Generous God, thank you for your abounding goodness and sacrificial love. Forgive me for taking the blessings I enjoy for granted and for being stingy with the resources you place in my care. May the widow who gave you everything she had be my model as I seek to live as a follower of Jesus and may generosity of spirit and action characterize my life. Help me, Lord, to excel in the grace of giving that I may bring glory to your name and good to my neighbors, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

**Suggested Verse for Meditation/Memorization:**

"But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving." (2 Corinthians 8:7 NIV)

**Things to Try:**

- Pray about and contribute, as God leads you, whether the amount is small or large, to an organization that assists those in need. (consider Covenant World Relief or other organizations with good track records of using funds well)
- Do something kind and generous for someone each day this week (think "random acts of kindness"). Be intentional about it. What we practice becomes second nature.
- Prayerfully review your financial giving to the church and other organizations that you both benefit from and feel led to support in their mission. How well does the amount(s) you are giving reflect your belief in the importance of the organization's mission, your appreciation for the benefits you and those you love receive from the organization, your desire/call to be generous with the resources God has entrusted to you, and especially your sense of God's leading?
- Pray each morning that God would give you an opportunity to be a blessing during the day ahead. Then, keep your eyes open for the opportunities God brings your way and

take action as the opportunities arise. Be a blessing and experience the joy of the flow of God's blessing in and through and right back to you.

**Further Suggested Readings:**

- 2 Corinthians 8-9
- 1 Kings 17:8-16
- Psalm 146
- Hebrews 9:24-28