

## GENEROSITY

11.19.06 [the heart of heartland]

### [conversation]

God wants us to be liberal...

God wants us to be liberal... and not only does he want us to be liberal, but he *expects* it out of us as well! Keep scratching your heads, it's okay, believe me...

In a culture of bickering and infighting between democrats and republicans, right-wing and left-wing, moderates and conservatives and progressives, in many circles this word "liberal" has become nothing more than a four letter word. It's been equated with evil and deception, with elitism and snobbery, with craziness, hypocrisy and even downright lunacy.

Yet Scripture is clear, God wants us to be liberal... and the crazier thing is, he *expects* it out of us.

In fact, God expectations are so great that in the Bible those that were found to be the opposite ended up dead. Just look at Joshua 7 and Acts 5 sometime.

God wants us, God *expects* us to be liberal... and if you're not, well, you might just die because of it!

*(tongue in cheek)*

If you have your Bibles with you this morning, turn with me to 2 Corinthians where we'll see God's directive and expectation for his people to be liberal. If you don't have a Bible and would like to follow along with us this morning, just raise your hand and one of our ushers will come around with a Blue Bible. 2 Corinthians 8, page 820 in the Blue Bibles.

Paul wrote this letter, 2 Corinthians, to the church he planted in Corinth. This was a particularly difficult church for Paul, chronicled well in the letters of 1 & 2 Corinthians—yet he loved them like none other. Paul spent a great amount of time and energy with the Corinthians, writing to them, teaching them, loving them, pastoring them, and training them.

Corinth was an extremely wealthy and affluent city situated in the country of Greece, rivaled only by the wealthy powerhouses of Athens and Thebes. You could say that Corinth resembled a modern day Chicago in terms of its wealth and affluence. It was a major port town with traders and businessmen coming through to buy and sell their trades, often times shipping their art and pottery all over the world. Corinth was a major influence in the world—and their wealth was remarkable. In fact, because of the great wealth, affluent lifestyle, extravagance and high cost of living it was said around the known world, "Not everyone can go to Corinth." This was an extremely cosmopolitan city, and the church of Corinth lived and worked in this atmosphere of elitism.

2 Corinthians 8.1, Paul begins by telling the story of the Macedonian Christians, a group of Christians that resided north of Corinth in the northern parts of Greece. Paul describes how these Macedonians turned themselves over to being liberal people, and

not only do we find Paul describing this group of Christians, but commending them for this achievement as well, spurring and challenging the Corinthians to follow suit!

Liberals?! In my Bible?! Never!

Well, let's read... 2 Corinthians 8.1 – “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

The Macedonians were a very poor people. They didn't have very much as they lived in a “frontier” type of setting where a great many different ethnicities and peoples came together. There wasn't a great center of trade or anything spectacular about this region, especially when compared to Corinth, they were a simple people with simple lives not with no extravagance, no wealth, no celebrity status, yet the text says they gave generously...liberally, even beyond their own ability.

[\*humph\*] Liberals.

How wild is this! How crazy, how strange? These Macedonians, these Christians were liberals! They were giving liberally—generously to the Christians in Jerusalem that were also living impoverished lives. And this is what God expects of us, that we too, just like the Macedonians, would give liberally, that we would be a generous people with **all** that we have.

God expects us, as his people to be a liberal people... generosity.

Paul was blown away by these Christians. The generosity of the Macedonians pumped up and excited Paul in great ways. In fact, they even took Paul by surprise with their liberalness. In verse 5 he makes note of something that many times we often overlook ourselves. Paul clarifies for us what he saw in the Macedonians and shows us what true generosity really is.

8.5 – “And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.”

Did you catch that? The first thing that the Macedonians did was give their tithe—they gave their tithe, their first fruits, their worship first and foremost, then from there true generosity spewed forth. So, not only did the Macedonians give 10% of their income to the Kingdom, but then added more and more on top of that as they gave to those in Jerusalem. Paul said earlier that they gave as much as they were able, above and beyond their tithe, and then even more beyond their ability. They gave and they gave and they gave in liberal, carefree amounts...

Generosity is not tithing. Generosity is what happens after the tithe. We cannot truly be a generous people unless we are tithing first—unless we are putting God first with our finances and finding ourselves faithful to the command of tithing. Paul is clear—

generosity is what happens after we tithe. How are we as a church at generosity? Well, we certainly do some great things with our finances as a church—but we're not really all that generous because we don't all tithe... I say this because if we all tithed, we wouldn't find ourselves in the financial quagmire that we're in.

As I stand before you this morning I can honestly tell you that tithing has not always been the easiest thing for me, and I'm not expecting it to be easy for you either.

When Tracy and I first got married we weren't the richest of people... we were... well... lets just say we were rich in love! We lived off of macaroni and cheese and on the most special of occasions were able to put some hot dogs in there! Now that's livin'! mmmmmmm....

We didn't have a whole lot, we lived in an apartment in Bloomington scrapping together whatever we could, while Tracy worked at a doctors office and I, well, I didn't do much. We scraped by while I searched for a ministry and worked part-time at a drug rehab center. It was only maybe a month into our marriage when we both came to the epiphany that it was time for us to start tithing. We both grew up in the church, had heard multitudes of sermons on tithing, but never before had it clicked for us until this moment that tithing was an important thing to start doing.

This wasn't the easiest decision for us to make as all of a sudden we were being "forced" to live off of a lot less than we were before... we went from living off nickels to living off pennies... yet somehow it worked. Amazingly, God took care of all of our needs. There was even a time, just a couple of years ago, where the church we were both working at wasn't doing so well financially and we had to miss almost a whole months pay at one time—yet God was still there taking care of our needs, and looking out for us. People helped us pay our rent, gave us food, and loved on us. Yet we never stopped tithing. It was a hard decision to make, but we pushed forward in the knowledge that God would take care of us—he'd done a good job so far!

Tithing isn't always easy, there are a lot of hard decisions that we have to ponder and sacrifices that we have to make but God commands us and he expects us to give the tithe, 10% of our income... but it doesn't stop there. God expects us to be liberals right? So, he also expects us to give to his Kingdom and for his Kingdom... generously, liberally.

Tracy and I didn't just stop with tithing, and neither did the Macedonians, but over the course of near 5 years of marriage we have increased our giving to God's kingdom in lots of different ways. I don't say this to boast or brag about what it is that we are doing, but rather to say it's amazing to see how God has continued to faithfully take care of us. We may not have a lot of the things that we want, but we've traded those things for making a bigger difference and impact in God's Kingdom! And it's been amazing to see how much our lives have been shaped and changed as a result of trusting in Him as we give.

Generosity doesn't come overnight, but rather it's something that you must work towards—and it's something that must be developed within ourselves as we begin to rely

upon and trust more and more on God. But first, it all starts with tithing... and then generosity flows from there.

Tracy and I now give 15-16% of our combined income to furthering God's Kingdom. And honestly, I wish we could do more! We've helped missionaries in China, Mexico, Afghanistan, Germany, Romania, Russia and other European countries, we've helped church plants in the inner cities of the US and have helped little children in foreign countries be fed and go to Christian schools where they're able to learn about Jesus, I think we've even give to some Bible translators, abused women shelters, the Salvation Army and all sorts of other things. We've given to a vast amount of organizations and people in just over 4 years that I can barely remember everything that we've been able to be a part of... but we've seen God's Kingdom grow as a result.

We've gotten letters and updates on some of the missions and ministry's we've supported and have heard amazing stories of how God is working! And it's funny, but sometimes we're only able to give \$10 here or \$25 there... but we try, and we work and we strive, and God uses those small gifts of generosity to make a difference. We give generously, we give above our tithe because we believe in God's Kingdom and we believe that God is faithful.

But first, we have to trust God in our tithe.

Tithe, tithe, tithe, tithe, tithe... that's all I hear about, tithe, tithe, tithe... what's the purpose of this tithing that you speak of? Well, Moses spoke of tithing in rather clear terms when he wrote in Deuteronomy 14.23: "The purpose of tithing is to teach you to always fear the Lord your God." Tithing isn't just something you do, but it has a purpose—and the purpose is to teach us a love and respect, a trust and a dependence on God. It's a tool of our worship to make sure that God gets and has top billing in our life.

God expects us to be a generous people and he doesn't want us to just stop with our tithe. God expects us to be a generous people that give in liberal amounts to the furthering of His Kingdom!

Now generosity can be construed in different ways. Sometimes we think that the only way that we can be generous is if we give \$100 to something or more. Well, did you know that \$10 can go a lot further in a third world country than it can in the U.S? Sometimes even the smallest of gifts of generosity can make the biggest difference! In some countries \$10 is 1 months salary. I may never have been on a cross-cultural missions trip in my entire life, in fact I've never been out of the country—but I've been a part of missions work all across the globe! I've been able to make tangible differences all over the world by generously giving \$10 or \$25 to a missionary or Kingdom-focused organization. And that gets me pumped and excited about how God continues to use even the smallest of gifts of generosity to expand his Kingdom!

I want us to be a generous people, that give and give and give and give until it seems we can't give anymore... but then we give and give and give and give and give finding more and more ways to make a difference around the world because of what we give. I want us as a church to get to the point of generosity—the point beyond our tithe, where each

one of us is making a difference in another part of the world, whether Guatemala where Ted and Kim will be, or in China or India where the gospel is spreading like wildfire. I want each and everyone of us to be making a difference in the lives of other people because of our generosity—where we're taking care of our brothers and sisters here at home, but also those that are in need all throughout our country and all over the world!

This doesn't mean that in our generosity we give everything to Heartland. Let me tell you something, Heartland isn't about the money. God expects you to tithe to your home church, but he expects you to be liberally generous everywhere. So, that means in your generosity you search out and find missionaries that you can support, you look for church plants and organizations that are making the biggest difference for the Kingdom and you get involved! You look and look and look for ways to make a difference in your generosity!

Tithing and generosity can change your life!

Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 15:10: "Give freely without begrudging it, and the Lord your God will bless you in everything you do."

Generosity is a long-term goal and we need to start working towards this point! It's a long-term goal and it won't happen overnight, but it is something that can happen if we start to trust the Lord of the tithe—and if we just start.

Generosity is a way of life that not only changes our lives, but also changes the world around us displaying the unselfish love of Jesus for the whole world to see.

There are some of you out there that are reluctant, you find yourself resistant to this idea and teaching and in fact are thinking "here it is again, I told you the church is all about money."

Well, that's right... it is. And I'm not going to apologize for it. This money isn't for us—we don't take a collection every week to bless ourselves, we take a collection every week first as an act of worship, and second to further God's Kingdom around the world! That's why we give a chunk of money every week to local ministries like Hands of Jesus, the Salvation Army, New Life Pregnancy Center, and to worldwide ministries like Ted and Kim's Guatemala work, and hopefully soon to building wells in Africa, helping educate and provide medical care for children in India, and continuing to shine the love and grace of Jesus into all the regions of the world—including Decatur, Illinois. Some of the tithe stays here for those that are in need in our own community, as well as to pay our bills as a church.

We take a collection, we do offering in order to make a difference... and I won't apologize for that.

The more generous we are, the more work we'll be able to be a part of in God's Kingdom! If God's Kingdom is important to us, then we'll find a way to become generous people... and if not then we'll end up dead... because ultimately we put ourselves up as more important than God and his Kingdom.

Remember how I mentioned at the beginning Joshua 7 and Acts 5? Well, the opposite of generosity is greed. And these stories are stories of greed.

In Joshua 7 Achan took things for himself and his family that were earmarked for God—and this action of greed brought shame and judgment upon the entire nation of Israel. Once Achan was found out, the ground opened up and swallowed him and his entire family in judgment. Acts 5 details a similar type of story of greed with Ananias and Sapphira.

Greed affects not only the entire church but the entire Kingdom as well. Tithing and generosity is what makes the Kingdom run. And when we are greedy, we affect each other in this building and those that we claim to care about wanting to know Jesus. We must turn from greed and be a generous people. We must set out a course in our own lives towards becoming generous people—and in turn we will see and be a part of watching God do some of the greatest and most amazing things all around us!

I've seen high school students begin their journey down this path—I've seen high school students that decided to be a generous people and use the small amounts of money that they were earning to make a great difference in the lives of those around them and around the world. I've seen these same high school students collect money in generosity to help pay for the electric bill of a family in the church that was struggling. I've seen these very same high school students collect clothing and food for a family that's house was burned to the ground. I've seen these same high school students continue in generosity as they give to Compassion International by sponsoring children from third world countries making a tremendous difference in their lives.

If high school students can start their journey down this path, we as a church certainly can as well!

We will be a generous people... we just have to be intentional about doing it. Generosity is not done haphazardly, but rather intentionally.

Winston Churchill said, "You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give." What kind of life are you making? What kind of impact are you leaving in parts of the world that you'll never ever visit in your entire life? What are you doing with the things that you have been given by God and how are you using those things generously to impact the world and make a difference for his Kingdom?

**[PRAY]**