

We've Misunderstood God's Plan for Prosperity

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Text: 2 Corinthians 9

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Series: Confessions of an Imperfect Church (2 Corinthians)

Introduction: Open your Bible to 2 Corinthians 9. We are continuing our series through the book of 2 Corinthians entitled, "Confessions of an Imperfect Church". And like the imperfect church at Corinth, we have a long way to go in our growing and changing in Christ.

Today's confession is this: "We've misunderstood God's Plan for Prosperity". We think obtaining as much stuff as possible is the way to prosperity. Hoarding, gaining, and not being generous. Seeing my needs and not the needs of others is the world's way.

It's true. As Americans we have way too much stuff. We take way too much for granted. We seem to believe that the way to be prosperous is to hoard our wealth. I want to persuade you that the Bible teaches the opposite. If you want to be prosperous, you must give your wealth away. We know the most generous people are the happiest people. Jesus Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive".

The Bible is clear that material wealth doesn't equate to happiness. Don't take my word for it. Listen to the richest people that have ever lived.

- "The care of 200 million dollars is enough to kill anyone. There is no pleasure in it." W H Vanderbilt said that. Vanderbilt was the one that built the railroads.
- Malcolm Forbes said, "Money isn't everything, as long as you have enough."
- John Jacob Astor of the Waldorf Astoria hotel fame said this: "I am the most miserable man on earth." He said, "Money brings me nothing but a certain dull anxiety".
- "Millionaires seldom smile," Andrew Carnegie said.
- John D. Rockefeller who made all of his money there in the oil business, at least later in his life said, "I have made millions, but they have brought me no happiness."

Context

Remember the context. Paul was taking up a collection for the impoverished **Jewish saints at Jerusalem**. He would do this for ten years. The Gentile churches were giving toward the offering. You had the poor **Macedonian** Christians outgiving the rich and

lavish Corinthian church by a long shot. What was their secret? How could the poor Macedonians give so much when they had so little?

They understood prosperity. We are going to find out that if we want true prosperity, God demands several things from us.

I. **God's Plan for Prosperity demands we set an example**

(vs. 1-5).

Most people don't care about setting an example. They care about their own comfort. Look at our presidents and politicians. When there is a great scandal, people say - a public figure's personal life shouldn't matter. It's personal. Well it does matter. And if you are a Christian it doubly matters!

A. Generosity can **encourage** a church, "your zeal has stirred up most of them".

Verses 1-2, "Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, 2 for I know your **readiness**, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And **your zeal has stirred up most of them.**"

Corinth was the capital of Achaia. It's like referring to Chicago as Illinois. The **luxurious** Corinthians had already expressed their "readiness" by an offering they gave. They assured Paul it was just the beginning. But something happened. The church at Corinth was taken over by false teachers who charged that Paul was a charlatan and a fake and a weakling.

The Corinthian's first attempt at an offering was a token. It was just a portion of what they had committed to giving. Yet, it was very, very generous. The poor saints at Macedonia saw their generosity and very likely equaled or exceeded the Corinthian offering.

That would be like us sending a \$2000 offering to Haiti, and then the saints in Joplin Missouri seeing our generosity and matching it. The Joplin saints far exceeded what most would have thought possible. And the rich Chicago saints while generous could give a whole lot more.

The Corinthians wanted to give more and they had expressed it on numerous occasions, so much so that Paul mentioned it to the poor saints at Macedonia – Berea, Philippi, and Thessalonica. And Paul says they had a huge influence on these poor saints. He says, "your zeal has stirred up most of them" (vs. 2).

Illustration-What Parents Do, Children Follow

Have you ever heard, "Do as I say, not as I do?" That's a recipe for disaster! Parents, do you know why some children give the firstfruits of everything they earn to God? Because their Mommy and Daddy do. Do you know why many children have come to

love and trust Jesus? Because their parents love Jesus and their parents have won their children's hearts.

Example matters. You can have tons of knowledge. Knowledge puffs up. Is your example stirring up others around you? If you have kids, are they stirred for God? How about fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and family members? Are you living out your love and generosity before them?

B. Selfishness can **discourage** a church, "if... you are not ready, we would be humiliated"

Giving Must Be Carefully Considered-No Empty Promises

Verses 3-4, "But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. 4 Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident."

Empty promises are hurtful. The Body of Christ is about commitment. Commitment to each other as a family in Christ is vital. It may look like Paul is hounding or nagging the congregation, but he is actually giving vital accountability.

We need that **accountability** in our church. Without it, we are going to fail. We were not made to go life alone. We need companionship, compassion, and accountability. Paul was providing that to the Corinthian church. He sent Titus and two others to precede Paul. Paul would have been humiliated had he come with the sacrificial and poor Macedonian believers and find that their rich and luxurious Corinthian

C. A generous example is only impeded by the sin of **covetousness**.

Avoid Covetousness - PLEONEXIA

Verse 5, "So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction [lit. "a squeeze" or "covetousness"]."

If God's work is done in God's way, and if it deserves your gifts, and if you have them to give and you decide not to, sin is the issue. You ought to have a willing heart, and if you do not, Paul says it is because of the sin of "**pleonexia**".

Definition of Pleonexia

The word "pleonexia" indicates grasping to hold more, grasping to get more at the expense of others. It's all built around selfishness and pride. But in the end, churches and stewardship programs succeed because God's people are not covetous.

Scripture Proofs

Do you have the sin of PLEONEXIA? Do you have what God wants you to give, but you spend it upon yourself?

- **Paul** says in Eph. 5:5 that anyone who is **covetous** is really an **idolator**.
- **Solomon** said covetous people are never satisfied and never thankful, **Ecclesiastes 5:10**. People without Christ will never have enough.
- We expect covetousness from reprobate minds who according to **Romans 1:29** are filled with all greed. We certainly don't expect it from Christians. The covetous, says Paul in **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**, the covetous shall not inherit the kingdom of God.
- In fact **1 Corinthians 5:11** says that believers are not even to associate with any professing Christian who is covetous.

The Company of the Greedy

Covetous people have left an ugly mark on the world.

- They are the **Balaams** of the world, preachers for hire.
- They are the **Ahabs** of the world
- the **Achans** of the world,
- the **King Sauls** of the world.
- They are the **rich young rulers** of the world who walk away from Christ sorrowfully and return to the world.
- They are the **Ananias** and **Sapphiras** of the world
- Worst of all they are the Judases of the world.

Who would want to be among such? No one would desire that kind of company and that kind of reputation. So I suggest to you what Paul said is wise, run from greed and run from covetous by being unselfish and generous.

The Gospel Transforms Us

The point of the Gospel is that there is a transformed heart. The Cross of Christ produces selflessness in us. Therefore, Gospel giving should never be “squeezed out of you” as an extraction. The idea is a covetous person begging and squeezing money out of you. It should be given because of love for the Lord, and never because of pressure or gimmicks or guilt trips. We should give willingly, not grudgingly.

If you are not giving your money to God with a willing, happy heart, then you ought not to give at all. Keep your money. The church is not a fundraiser. It is a family where we sincerely and carefully and thoughtfully and freely give as God moves us to give. Giving is an outflow of the Spirit of grace in our hearts.

II. God’s Plan for Prosperity demands we sacrifice what we have (vs. 6-7).

Verse 6, “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

The world will tell you that if you want prosperity, hold on to everything, hoard it, accumulate it, save it, invest it. The way to prosperity in the world is to HOLD on to it! It is the exact opposite in the Kingdom of Christ.

Some of you are asking, why should I be generous? If I'm generous, I'll be poor. Give me a good reason why I should give. Well, the point of giving is to get more so that you can provide for the needs of others. The Bible describes generosity as planting a seed by faith. Why do we give? So that we can produce a harvest!

A. A generous person sacrifices with an eye toward the **harvest** (vs. 6).

Verse 6, "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."

If you plant tomatoes what do you get? If you plant corn what do you get? (Corn!) If you plant money what do you get? You get money. This is not teaching the idolatry of the health / wealth message in the churches. That is pure covetousness. Here's the message: Give to this church and God will give you a hundred fold, and then you can buy your Lamborghini! The Biblical prosperity message is: plant your money in the kingdom and God will give you more, so you can give more of it away.

God's blessing on His children is never for selfish gain but to allow us to be a blessing to others.

The King and the Beggar

There's an old story of a king who went into his village to greet his subjects. Wandered through the streets and as he was doing that he came across a beggar sitting by the roadside. The beggar eagerly held up his little alms bowl, sure that the king would put in something of value for him. Instead the king looked down at him and made a most unique statement. He asked the beggar if he would please give him something?

Taken aback the beggar fished around and found three little grains of rice and dropped them into the king's hand. Well as the legend goes, at the end of the day when the beggar poured out what he had received, he found to his astonishment at the bottom of his bowl three grains of solid gold and he wished he had given the king everything.

B. A generous person is uniquely **loved** by God (vs. 7).

Verse 7, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Those who sacrifice what they have a uniquely loved by God. A cheerful give is one who is no constrained by guilt or give reluctantly or under compulsion.

Any real shepherd, any real pastor who loves his sheep would never lead them to forfeit their reward in their giving. So no shepherd and no pastor should ever pressure people or put them on guilt trips about their giving. If they give coerced externally, if they give painfully internally, they've lost their reward. God loves a hilarious giver, a happy, joyful giver. God wants a heart that is thrilled with the pleasure of giving. That's the kind God loves.

This is a very unusual statement. God has a unique love for a generous person. We know God loves all of His own. John 13, He loves His own which are in the world, He loves them unto perfection. John 16 says how much He loves us. But there is a special love that God gives to those reserved to committed generous giving. I don't know about

you but I want that. I cherish that. I would never want to forfeit that. I want the privilege of being uniquely loved by God. I want to experience the blessing of that.

III. God's Plan for Prosperity demands we **seek** first God's kingdom (vs. 8-10).

A. All our abundance comes from **God** (vs. 8-9).

Verses 8-9, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness".

Look at those words, "God is able". Say them: "God is able"! That's an amazing reassurance. All that we have is from God. He created the universe. He created you.

Lest anyone think that this is a new principle Paul quotes **Psalm 112:9** (ESV) — "He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever". God is the one who distributes freely, even to the poor!

Everything you have is not yours. You may have worked for it, but it is not yours. God gave it to you. Nothing you have is gotten by you autonomously.

B. God's prosperity to us is to be used for His **kingdom** (vs. 10).

Verse 8, "so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work".

Verse 10, God's purpose in giving you anything is to "increase the harvest of your righteousness".

Verse 11a, "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way."

IV. God's Plan for Prosperity will result in **sanctified** living (vs. 11-15).

Romans 8:29 tells us that God's plan is to sanctify us! ***You cannot grow in grace and in conformity without giving.*** Love is giving. Those who love God desire to give, because God is generous.

A. Generous giving results in God-dependence. **Verse 11a**, "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way."

B. Generous giving results in a thankful spirit. **Verse 11-12**, "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce **thanksgiving** to God. 12 For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many **thanksgivings** to God".

C. Generous giving results in God's **glory**. **Verse 13** – Here were these poor Jerusalem saints that sent missionaries to Antioch and later around the world. But now they were giving back to the Jewish church.

Verse 13, “By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others.”

D. Generous giving increases your friendships in the Lord! **Verse 14**, “while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.”

E. Generous giving results in conformity to Jesus. **Verse 15**, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”

Conclusion: When I came to know Christ I gave all to Him. I thought of nothing but His kingdom. I thought not greatness. God's plan of prosperity does not discount hard work and responsibility. But it is utterly God-dependent and a real test of our faith. I trust you are growing in Christ through your giving and seeing God prosper you and His kingdom!