

Generosity

Romans 12:8

Sermon Transcript by Pastor Ernest O'Neill

Sometimes we make detours in our studies and that's what we will be doing today. If you would like to look at it, it's Romans 12:8. You might remember that we dealt with the first part of that verse, "He who exhorts, in his exhortation." This week we will be talking about "He who contributes in liberality."

I don't know how all the husbands and wives here fell in love with each other, but my wife and I fell in love with each other in a week during which our chief responsibility was collecting and counting money for charity. It came about like this: We were both members of the student representative council in Queens University, Belfast, and one of the responsibilities of the executive committee was to run all the student activities at the University. One of these activities was what we called Rag Week. Rag Week was a week which I'm sure the citizens of Belfast hated, because it was when all the students of Queens University disguised themselves in all kinds of fancy dress costumes, makeup and masks, and then deliberately and with malice of forethought carried out a tricks-or-treats campaign on the whole city of Belfast. We disrupted the traffic, we disrupted all the classes in all the other schools and colleges, we painted all the statues of the city fathers white and generally made a nuisance of ourselves, all the time holding out our collection boxes in which we did manage to collect thousands of pounds for charity and for work among poor children. That is how we fell in love, doing that kind of thing.

Now it is interesting how in a week like that or a day like that you have probably some of the most satisfying time of your whole life. Apart from all the fun and tricks, you do get tremendous satisfaction out of doing something for somebody else, don't you? You get caught up in the whole thing. It is so good to feel you are doing something for somebody else in a way that nobody else will know about. You won't personally be thanked for it or be appreciated for it, you just enjoy it.

Somehow you feel that this is what living is about. You are ready to forget yourself and just live for other people for that time. In a way, we do feel that that is what we were made for. Have you ever thought if you interviewed the pipes in your home, what they would say? They would probably say the same thing as we are talking about in this experience. "Yes, we just carry water. We don't produce water, the reservoir does that. We don't get any thanks for carrying the water, but we do feel fulfilled just because we carry water from one place to another." In a sense we get the same satisfaction, don't we? We are probably at our happiest when we feel that we exist to carry something from someone to somebody else or to do something for someone else and not for ourselves.

Actually that is what we found to be true. We found several weeks ago that we are not in fact what we appear--individual pieces of flesh and blood. We are, in fact, maybe not part of the plumbing of a house, but we are part of Someone else. That Someone else is mentioned in John 1:4, "In him was life", that is, in Jesus. The Greek actually runs: "was not anything made. That which has been made was life in him." Now you were made, and you were actually life in Jesus before you came here. We have shared before that you are actually a spark of Jesus' life; that is why you are alive. You are a spark of his life encased in your personality and your body, but you are actually part of Jesus Himself. All the good impulses that you have and all the desire to help other people and to do something for other people comes not just because you are here on your own trying to slog out a

survival campaign somehow in this universe, but because you are part of Jesus Himself. The urges and the impulses you have to do something for somebody else are there because it is him inside you.

In fact, if you go down a few verses God explains our good impulses and our good desires in that way. Verse 9: "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world." In other words, you and I have this urge to do things for other people or to love other people because Jesus Himself, the seed of his Spirit, is inside us. I know it is incredible for those of us who don't think we are very religious or for anybody who says, "Well, I'm not a Christian yet, and I don't know that I will ever be", but loved ones the truth is still there that the good desires that you have in your heart come because the seed of Jesus' Spirit has been placed generously inside you by his Father. It is that seed of his Spirit that wants to do things and wants to give. That is really the purpose of our lives -- to allow that life of Jesus to flow through.

Now you remember what we said at the beginning of our studies on this subject of gifts. We said that some of us have the gift of prophecy and have it very obviously, but that doesn't mean that you all don't practice that gift at sometime. You do. Every one of us has been used by God at some time to give some word of comfort or encouragement to some other person. Nobody else has had the opportunity that we have had to do that. Some of us might have the gift of teaching, and that is a preeminent gift in our life, but all of us at sometime have probably exercised the gift of teaching--we have taught somebody something that has been useful in their life. So you can see all the gifts are usually exercised at sometime by some of us, even though some of them are preeminent parts of some of our lives.

Now, loved ones, that general use of gifts is particularly true of the one that we are studying this morning. This gift of generosity, or this gift of giving, is a gift that we all generally practice or are meant to practice every day of our lives. Let's look at what God advises about the exercise of this gift in Romans 12:8. "He who contributes, in liberality." The Greek word for contribute is "metadidomi" and it means not just to contribute or give but it means "share". One of the uses Paul makes of it is in I Thessalonians 2:8. "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." So even if you are sharing advice or a spiritual gift or food, first of all you have to share yourself with the person. It is true that the word "share" here in the Bible is used just as often about sharing material possessions or financial gifts. What I would like to talk about with you a little is exercising the gift of giving money or material possessions to another person.

The Revised Standard Version translation runs "he who contributes, in liberality." Here is one instance where the King James is better, because the word for liberality in Greek is "haplotēs" and it doesn't so much mean "liberality" as "single-mindedness". The King James version runs, "Let him who giveth, give with simplicity." That is the best meaning of this. Anybody who gives money or material possessions to somebody else, let him give it with simplicity, with single-mindedness, with one unselfish desire. That is the way Jesus has given us things, isn't it? Have you noticed recently the numbers on each daffodil? Well, you haven't, because he doesn't number the daffodils and he doesn't number the stars. He seems to have scattered his gifts all over the world with generosity and profusion. He seems to give with a total, unselfish attitude. When you think of the colors under the ocean that will never be seen by anybody, and yet God puts them there, He seems to be generous, doesn't he, with the way he gives his gifts? Think of all the mountains and rivers that only a few of us will ever see, and yet God seems to scatter those gifts. Think of all the eggs, a fraction of which turn into little baby creatures. Think of it! Think of how many eggs are laid, of all kinds, and how few of them turn into actual living creatures. It seems that he who has made all things, and

without whom nothing was made that was made--Jesus--it seems that he has given with absolute simplicity and extravagant generosity.

Do you remember the verse that says that God gives his gifts without repentance? He gave the gift of a sunrise and the gift of sight to see it to Charles Manson as he gave it to Mother Theresa. He gave the gift of smell and the gift of daffodils to Adolf Hitler in the same way as he gave it to Albert Schweitzer. God is good, isn't he? He doesn't try to control us by gifts. He doesn't give them to us and then sees if we appreciate them, he just gives generously to us. You must admit the whole earth is filled with a profusion of gifts. I don't know if you saw the piece in the local newspaper about the girl who was opening a natural food store and the big mystery was who had sent her a thousand red roses. A thousand roses! It is a drop in the bucket to compare with the masses of roses that you and I have seen in different places of the world. It seems that our dear Father overdoes it. He seems to overwhelm us with gifts of all kinds. You know the trouble we go to make snow on our ski slopes? He just snaps his fingers and we can't tackle the stuff, there is so much. You know the trouble we go to to try to get some heat, especially with this energy crisis we are beginning to find our way out of, and he turns the sun on in a moment and you just can't bear the heat. It seems that whenever God Himself gives or whenever Jesus gives, he gives with great generosity.

Loved ones, that is why you give. That is why you feel like giving at times. Jesus' dear Spirit is inside you trying to gather you up into the great stream of generosity that he scatters throughout the world every time he gets the sun to rise and fills the earth with heat and light. Every time you feel the desire to give, it is the Savior Himself expressing through you the same magnificent generosity that he brings to the earth every day in life. Have you ever thought how many little creatures grow another inch each day? You will have to suffer dog illustrations again; we have a new dog. I looked at the little guy, and it is amazing how he grows. I don't see how he could grow from the little that he eats, but he just grows. Suddenly you realize the dear Savior is making all kinds of little creatures grow day by day. So often we look at the trees and the ground and think it is all dead, that it is winter, but no, there are all kinds of little animals growing through the strength and generous life that he gives them. Loved ones, Jesus' Spirit is in you every time you feel that urge to give or do something for someone. It is Jesus' Spirit trying to gather you out of your littleness, out of your pettiness, and trying to draw you into the great torrent of generosity that he is pouring upon the earth every moment of our lives. That is what you are feeling. It is Jesus inside you, not moving you to a piece of parsimonious, coldly calculated good works, but just giving because the heart of the nature of God is generosity and love. That is the way the world holds together. Jesus is all the time trying to gather you and me up into that great circle of his gifts that go from hand to hand as long as we take part in this. As long as we let his Spirit take hold of us, we become part of the great circle of his gifts, that go from hand to hand and over millions of miles at incredible speeds and constantly reinforce in everybody the sense of the truth: Freely you have received, freely give.

In other words, when you let that Spirit of Jesus move through you, you actually reinforce in the world the truth that there is nothing any of us have that we have not received. How rich were you when you were born? How many clothes had you? How many cars had you? How rich will you be when you die? There is one secret to having what you need in between. You have nothing when you come into the world and you have nothing when you go out, and there is just one secret of God that enables you to have what you need. I'll show it to you, loved ones. Luke 6:38: "Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." It is so different from the world's recommendation for getting rich. The reason is that you didn't bring anything in, nor did I, and

neither of us will take anything out. There is only one dear guy who owns anything and he is giving it away every day, and that is our dear Father and his Son Jesus. Loved ones, the truth is when you allow his Spirit inside you to operate the same way, and you give, then his whole life cycle works so that there will be plenty given to you. The more you give away the more you express to him your absolute faith that all you have has come from him and whatever you need will come from him in the future and he is able to give you what you need.

It is a rule of life that the Spirit of Jesus in you is always trying to give generously as He Himself has given to us the world and our physical being. Do you know how much it would cost to get a nose like yours--however horrible that nose may be! Do you realize how much money it would cost? That heart of yours? We haven't yet got a heart that will go like that; we are still trying. Those kidneys of yours; that brain of yours. He gave you them freely and they are so valuable that you would not dream of selling them. Loved ones, that is what generosity is about. It is about Jesus inside you trying to catch you up out of your own little pettiness and your own attempt to hang on. Do you see it is the nature of reality? That is why you give. Have you ever caught any wind in your hand as it was passing you? No, you haven't! You can't catch wind. If you ever did catch it and get it into your pocket, it wouldn't be wind, it would be air. That is why you give. Give because that is the nature of reality--it is the way the world works, and it is the way God works with each one of us. You give because that is the nature of reality. If you take the other approach and say, "Forget it! I am going to hold onto things!" All right, hold onto everything. Keep everything and don't give anything away. That breath? Stop giving it away! Don't give that breath away, keep it! And you know if you keep it, that's the end! It is the same for everything. When you psych yourself out of that generous spirit of Jesus, your lips grow thin, your eyes get narrow, your body begins to wither, your heart begins to shrink and you begin to die in the riches you have accumulated by your own covetousness. The only way to be rich is to give it away as fast as you can. It is a declaration to God that you are not your own, and that you know fine well that your prosperity depends not on whether you keep your job or not; you know your prosperity depends on his generous goodness and unless he keeps it coming, you are lost.

Loved ones, that is what generosity is about; it is giving with simplicity. It is giving because it is natural for you to give, because Jesus is inside you and he wants to give through you. You have to be unnatural, unnatural in God's sight and in God's plan, in order not to give. The nature of the universe and the nature of reality in God's heart is not grasping, it is not protecting, it is not defending self; it is giving. In other words, I would encourage us all to give, not for the sake of the money, but because that is what we were made to do. And that is the way you begin to get caught up in the stability and the excitement of God's generous, extravagant heart.

Now if you say to me, "What about practical things?" They are never as interesting as the heart of things, but let's look at two of them. I will show you what I can understand, but you have to seek God too for yourself. Malachi 3:10: "Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." I think that verse, especially in the light of the fact that it says, "that there may be food in my house", means that we give a tenth of our income to the body to which God has guided us to belong. Now if you say, "Why would you do that?" First of all, for the same reason as you invest in certain stocks and shares. Nobody invests in stocks and shares without studying the board of directors, the management, the product, the way the business is performing. That is part of it. When you give your money to God, you are really giving it into the hands of someone who is going to use it for God's glory, but you are dependent on what they are going to do. So it is important to give it into God's hands through

men and women with whom you have a continuous weekly fellowship so that you know that they are walking in God's will and that your money is going for the purposes that God would want it to be used for. I think that is one of the reasons.

I think another reason is something I experienced myself. I thought, "Well, Lord, I know some things that need to be done here in church, so why don't I just use my tithe for them and not put it in the offering?" So I did that for a month or two and God just made it clear to me, "You haven't given that money away at all." And I said, "I have!" He said, "No, you haven't given it into my care for me to use at my discretion." Then I thought I would come around the back of him and said, "But Lord, I'm the guy that often decides where a lot of our money goes. There is no difference between seeking your will here for it and seeking your will in connection with the gifts of the body." He said, "There is absolute difference. As pastor and shepherd, you seek me and I give you wisdom and discernment, not for your money, but for the money of all my children. And so I want you to put your tithe into that and not use it as an extension of your own will or your own interest in what should be done." It seems there is a saving feature in that. That is one of the reasons I thought we should have a unitary budget where I wouldn't ever ask you for money. Also, we don't have special offerings. The reason is, that it seems to me that the spirit of this command about tithing is--you get rid of the money, out of your pocket, you get it into God's hands and give it to him. "Lord, it is yours! Use it at your discretion. I have no longer control of it." The money is not an extension of our own will as so often it is when we use it personally. That is the tithe. It seems it should go to the body of Jesus to which God has led you to belong.

You know that is only the beginning of the giving in the Bible. Look at Deuteronomy 15:7. You see here that this was on top of the tithes even for the Old Testament saints. "If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren, in any of your towns within your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be." They were encouraged to lend without usury and therefore in fact to give the gift and let it be. So loved ones, after our tithes comes the generosity to those other causes or those other people that we feel Jesus is leading us to give to.

Now, any questions? Because I am anxious to learn too. It seems to me with your tithe that you do have to take care of your unpaid bills. But obviously it is not practical to set up an impractical budget which will constantly require you to short change God in order to spend your money the way you want. So obviously if you are in difficulty at this present time and we all ought to move towards a balanced budget that will allow us to give our tithe to our Father and yet take care of our bills. When we get into an interim problem, God wants us to maintain a witness before others that is blameless by paying our debts.

Question 1: What's the difference between the 10% of our income being given to God and the other 90% you govern yourself?

It seems the aim in both is to get Jesus' mind on it. But as so often in the Old Testament, you remember they give the first fruit to indicate to God that it all belonged to him. It seems to me that the 10% is God's very practical way of saying, "Get rid of the stuff! Don't let it cling to your fingers. Get it into my hands and forget it. Let me use it as I want. Do that with all your giving is what I want you to do. Except I ask you to let my son guide you in the personal distribution of the other money."

It seems to me you have to be very careful about the prosperity teaching, i.e. give money to God and

he'll make you rich. It appears to me that that is the very opposite of meaning of this verse. "He who gives, give with simplicity." It is because Jesus loves us in our hearts and he wants to give, not for selfish desire to get something back. It seems giving with the same extravagance that God has given to us.

Question 2: Is tithing by definition a work?

I'm sure that Jesus' words to us are that our righteousness is to exceed those of the Pharisees. I'm sure as you remember the Jews had all kinds of little things that they were to do when they reaped their crop field. They were to leave the edges for the poor people and they had all kinds of things like that. These were marks of the fact that they were to take a little for themselves as possible and pass on the rest to others. The 10% tithe is God's way of saving some of us who have got used to thinking of ourselves as the chief charity. That is the real purpose of the tithe. It is to dig us out of that trench we get ourselves into. It is really a minimal guideline.

For many of us, it is the first step into freedom. You have no idea of the imprisonment you are in. I am not after your money. I don't want it. It is the first step into freedom in regard to your finances when you at last stop thinking that all one can expect to do in this world is eat your way out by one way or another by luck and hard work. The first moment you step out of that, you see forget that. All the best things I have received have been given to me freely and generously and I am going to do the same. When you step into that flow of generous spirit that runs through your heart because of Jesus and runs through the whole universe, you take part in reality. Life begins to fall together in that area of your life.

Let's pray.

Dear Father, we cannot question the numbers of the daffodils and we can't question the numbers of the stars. We can't question that you have given us thousands of lakes, beautiful rivers and mountains. Lord, every time we think of something you have done, you have done it well. You have done it better than we men and women do it. You have done it with a generous extravagance that puts us to shame. Now Father we want to thank you for that.

Dear Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are all the time moving inside us to bring us into the same liberty ourselves and into the same generosity. Lord, we would go with the flow, go with this stream and begin to give and give and "give again what God has given me, to spend ourselves nor count the cost, to serve right gloriously. The Lord of all the worlds that are and all that are to be." Lord, we give ourselves to you to be part of the generous circle of gifts that is constantly moving. You have promised you will continue to the very end of the world. Lord, we thank you for it. We thank you for the miracle, "Give and it will be given to you." Thank you, Lord.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of his Holy Spirit be with each of you this coming week.