

## Live Generously and Graciously toward Others

Many of the stories we read in the book of Acts demonstrate what I call the cycle of ministry. They highlight a cycle of giving—receiving—giving—receiving—giving. God first provides Jesus, who brings the good news—who *is* the good news! His disciples begin in Jerusalem to share their faith. A community of believers, a church, begins. The people share their food and possessions, making sure no one is in need.

Peter preaches to large crowds and teaches Cornelius and a man from Ethiopia. Barnabas sells a field and gives the money to the apostles to distribute so that everyone has enough to live on. The church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to the church in Antioch of Syria. When they hear about people who don't have food, the Antioch Christians send money back to Jerusalem.

Saul, also known as Paul, encounters Jesus in a dramatic way and is helped by Ananias and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas preach and teach in Asia. John Mark, Silas, and Timothy hear and believe at different times and in different circumstances and then go on to spread the news. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke travel to Philippi and share the gospel with Lydia and her companions.

Receiving the gospel with an open heart fills the new believers with thankfulness and joy, which in turn lead to amazing generosity. Lydia and other converts provide lavish hospitality and support in order to further Paul's ministry.

In Acts 18 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, we hear about the generous, gracious relationship Paul shares with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth. Their ministry benefits other people in the city. Paul then asks the church in Corinth to continue the cycle of ministry by sending money to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Before we look more closely at these stories, let's pray together. *God, we thank you for your generosity toward us. Guide us as we read the stories from Acts and Corinthians. Help us to give joyfully, out of our abundance, to those who have need. And let us receive with grace what others seek to give. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

The events recounted in Acts 18 are part of Paul's second missionary journey. After leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas – and Timothy too – travel through a few towns before arriving in Thessalonica where they spend three tumultuous days. They escape to Berea, but Paul soon is forced to move on to Athens and then to the Greek city of Corinth, where Silas and Timothy meet up with him again.

In Corinth, the men meet a married couple. Priscilla and Aquila are refugees who had been living in Rome until the emperor expelled all Jews from the city. We don't know whether they became Christians before or after they meet Paul. We do know that they become two of Paul's strongest allies in his ministry as well as coworkers in the profession of tentmaking.

Paul spends a year and a half with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth. Then they all travel to Ephesus. Paul leaves them in Ephesus while he goes on to Jerusalem and then back to Antioch. By this time, Aquila and Priscilla are so deeply rooted in the Christian faith that they are able to instruct another powerful teacher named Apollos, who has also come to believe that Jesus is the

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<sup>1</sup> This prayer and sermon draw from Joanna Harader, *Shine at Home: Spring 2021*, MennoMedia, [www.shinecurriculum.com](http://www.shinecurriculum.com), p. 56.

Messiah. Paul mentions the couple again in three of the New Testament letters.<sup>2</sup> It seems that they had a long missionary career, sometimes traveling with Paul and sometimes staying behind in a community to provide instruction and leadership.

We know that the church in Corinth is significant for Paul. Not only does he meet Priscilla and Aquila there, but finds other supporters as well. After leaving Corinth, Paul continues to offer support and guidance to them. The New Testament contains two letters from Paul to the church in Corinth.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul requests that the believers in Corinth share their financial resources with other churches. In making this specific request, Paul outlines five general Christian principles of generosity that still speak to us today: material poverty does not lead to poverty of spirit; it is a privilege to share “in this ministry to the saints” by giving money; we should give out of our abundance to establish a “fair balance”; we should give cheerfully; and God will provide for us.

Listen to what Paul writes in his fundraising appeal. Consider the ways in which you could live generously and graciously toward others. Although in this case Paul is talking specifically about money, keep in mind that we can also be generous with time, attention, love, acceptance, and knowledge as well as with other kinds of possessions.

*Now, brothers and sisters, let me tell you about the amazing gift of God’s grace that’s happening throughout the churches in Macedonia. Even in the face of severe anguish and hard times, their elation and poverty have overflowed into a wealth of generosity. I watched as they willingly gave what they could afford and then went beyond to give even more. They came to us on their own, begging to take part in this work of grace to support the poor saints in Judea. We were so overwhelmed—none of us expected their reaction—that they truly turned their lives over to the Lord and then gave themselves to support us in our work as we answer the call of God. That’s why we asked Titus to finish what he started among you regarding this gracious work of charity.<sup>3</sup>*

Paul begins his appeal by pointing to the example of the churches in Macedonia, who gave without being asked, even though they themselves had very little. It’s difficult to be on the receiving end of this kind of generosity – when someone who has less than you do wants to gift you with something. Sometimes living graciously toward others means accepting these kinds of unexpected gifts.

*Just as you are rich in everything—in faith and speech, in knowledge and all sincerity, and in the love we have shown among you—now I ask you to invest richly in this gracious work too. I am not going to command you, but I am going to offer you the chance to prove your love genuine in the same way others have done. You know the grace that has come to us through our Lord Jesus the Anointed. He set aside His infinite riches and was born into the lowest circumstance so that you may gain great riches through His humble poverty. Listen, it’s been a year since we called your attention to this opportunity to demonstrate God’s grace, so here’s my advice: pull together your resources and finish what you started. Remember how excited you were at first; it’s time to complete this task in the same spirit.<sup>4</sup>*

Now Paul puts on a bit of pressure. He asks the Corinthians to follow through on a project they had started. I wonder what was bogging them down. Had they lost enthusiasm?

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 4:19

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:1-6, *The Voice*.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:7-11, *The Voice*.

Were they waiting to form a fund-raising committee? Did they disagree about the process? Was nobody willing to take leadership of the project? What would it take to get them “unstuck”?

*Now if there is a willingness to help, give within your means. That’s perfectly acceptable. No one expects you to go without or borrow to give. The objective is not to go under so others will have some relief; the objective is to use this opportunity today to supply their needs out of your abundance. One day it may be the other way around, and they will need to supply your needs from what they have. That’s equality. As it is written, “The one who gathered plenty didn’t have more than he needed; the one who gathered little didn’t have less.”<sup>5</sup>*

I appreciate this part of Paul’s appeal. Some churches or ministries tell people to give more than they can afford with the promise that they’ll receive much more in return. It’s not unusual for the preachers and ministries to get richer and richer while the donors continue to barely scrape by. Paul’s advice is to give within your means, realizing that we all go through seasons of scarcity and abundance. Some people can give a much larger share of their money, time, or energy, and still have plenty left over for themselves. Others need to give less.

The scripture Paul quotes is from Exodus 16:18. When the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt, they found themselves wandering and starving in the wilderness. God generously provided manna for them to eat. The divine command was that they only take as much as they needed for each day—that all people would have enough and no one would take too much.

*I praise God who lovingly burdened Titus’s heart for you just as He did mine. You see, when we approached him about you, he eagerly stepped up, not only because of our request but because of his own desire to help. We’re also sending with him a brother who is well known among the gatherings of believers because of how well he proclaims the good news. And there’s more you should know: he has been handpicked by the churches to accompany us as we carry on this work of grace. All this is being done for the glory of the Lord and to show our own good will. We’re being careful so that no one can claim that we are mishandling the funds we’ve collected. For we are taking every precaution to remain aboveboard—not only in the Lord’s eyes, but in the eyes of the people too. So we are also sending another brother who’s proven himself time and again. He’s certainly trustworthy and enthusiastic for the gospel; and after hearing about all you are doing, he’s even more excited because he has confidence in you. If anyone asks about Titus, he’s my partner and coworker in this ministry to you. If there’s any question about who the other brothers and sisters are, they are emissaries of the churches, traveling to bring glory to the Anointed One, our Liberating King. So welcome them before the community in love; show the churches they represent that I have not exaggerated your charity and kindness.<sup>6</sup>*

This section highlights the necessity of having trustworthy people and processes in place when it comes to handling money. It’s important for any organization – including religious ones – to have a system of checks and balances in place so the integrity of the institution is maintained. Knowing how money will be used is an important factor in determining where and how much to donate to a specific cause. For me, personally, it’s humbling to know that your hard-earned money pays my salary and benefits. My hope is that I make good use of the time, energy, and talent for which you compensate me.

*There’s nothing further I could add about your efforts for God’s people in Judea. I know you are ready. I bragged on you throughout Macedonia, telling them how the people in Achaia have been prepared since last year; and your passion has been contagious. Still I thought it*

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:12-15, *The Voice*.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, *The Voice*.

would be best to send these brothers and sisters ahead to help you finish the final details so all my bragging wouldn't be for nothing. If some of the Macedonians decide to travel with me, all of us would be more than embarrassed if we arrived and you weren't ready to give after the way we've been going on about you. So to help you get your previously promised gift ready, it made sense to me to ask the brothers and sisters to go on ahead so you will have all the time you need to put it together as planned and so it doesn't look thrown together or coerced.<sup>7</sup>

This part of the letter makes me smile. Paul appeals to the Corinthians' conscience and sense of pride, telling them that he had bragged about their generosity to their neighbors to the north and urging them to follow through. In fact, the Macedonians had given money after hearing what the Corinthians were doing. It would be embarrassing if the church in Corinth reneged on their promise.

Witnessing the benevolence of other people can motivate us to openhandedness. While it's not healthy to get involved in a game of one-upmanship, a friendly competition in generosity can be a good thing. And, of course, it's always important to follow through on our commitments, unless it becomes impossible to do so.

*But I will say this to encourage your generosity: the one who plants little harvests little, and the one who plants plenty harvests plenty. Giving grows out of the heart—otherwise, you've reluctantly grumbled "yes" because you felt you had to or because you couldn't say "no," but this isn't the way God wants it. For we know that "God loves a cheerful giver."*<sup>8</sup>

Paul is probably quoting a well-known proverb here, but not one taken directly from the Old Testament book of Proverbs. Related ideas are found in Proverbs 11 and 22.

*One shares liberally and yet gains even more, while another hoards more than is right and still has need. A giving person will receive much in return, and someone who gives water will also receive the water he needs.*<sup>9</sup>

*Those who sow injustice reap disaster, and their methods of oppression will fail. Generous people are genuinely blessed because they share their food with the poor.*<sup>10</sup>

The more people grasp and hoard, the more they need. Those who give freely and generously find that they're happier, healthier, and experience more blessings. In Luke, Jesus points out that generosity comes in more forms than commerce.

*If you don't want to be judged, don't judge. If you don't want to be condemned, don't condemn. If you want to be forgiven, forgive. Don't hold back—give freely, and you'll have plenty poured back into your lap—a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, brimming over. You'll receive in the same measure you give.*<sup>11</sup>

To withhold judgment, condemnation, and unforgiveness is to act generously, and, in God's economy, it is rewarded with the same kind of benevolence—pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

*God is ready to overwhelm you with more blessings than you could ever imagine so that you'll always be taken care of in every way and you'll have more than enough to share.*

*Remember what is written about the One who trusts in the Lord:*

*He scattered abroad; He gave freely to the poor; His righteousness endures throughout the ages.*

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:1-5, *The Voice*.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:6-7, *The Voice*.

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 11:24-25, *The Voice*.

<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 22:8-9, *The Voice*.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 6:37-38, *The Voice*.

*The same One who has put seed into the hands of the sower and brought bread to fill our stomachs will provide and multiply the resources you invest and produce an abundant harvest from your righteous actions. You will be made rich in everything so that your generosity will spill over in every direction. Through us your generosity is at work inspiring praise and thanksgiving to God.*<sup>12</sup>

Here Paul quotes from Psalm 112:9. This psalm lists the righteous person's qualities of character that reflect God's character. A God-fearing person is generous, lends to others, and conducts their affairs so as to injure no one. Material prosperity does not give someone permission for abusive misuse of money, nor for miserliness, but for sharing in mutual aid.

Giving freely to those who do not have enough is a common theme throughout the scriptures. This is often tied back to God's provision for the people during the Exodus.

*God enforces justice for the powerless, such as orphans and widows, and loves foreigners, making sure they have food and clothing. You must love those foreigners living with you in the same way. Remember how you were foreigners in the land of Egypt!*<sup>13</sup>

*If your fellow citizen becomes poor and cannot take care of his needs, then you must support him with what you have. Look after him, as you would a stranger or outsider, so he may keep living in your community.*<sup>14</sup>

And now, back to Paul as he concludes his appeal to the Corinthians.

*For this mission will do more than bring food and water to fellow believers in need—it will overflow in a cascade of praises and thanksgivings for our God. When this mission reaches Jerusalem and meets with the approval of God's people there, they will give glory to God because your confession of the gospel of the Anointed One led to obedient action and your generous sharing with them and with all exhibited your sincere concern. Because of the extraordinary grace of God at work in you, they will pray for you and long for you. Praise God for this incredible, unbelievable, indescribable gift!*<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, says Paul, the followers of Jesus are joyfully generous with each other because God is graciously generous with us. Everything is done out of gratitude to God and to bring praise to God. The principles of generosity Paul outlines remain relevant to us. Material poverty does not lead to poverty of spirit. It is a privilege to share in ministry by giving what we have. We give out of our abundance to establish a "fair balance". We give cheerfully. God will provide for us.

The current issue of *Anabaptist World* contains many stories illustrating these principles.<sup>16</sup> I encourage you to read about people who are generous with their time, attention, love, acceptance, and knowledge as well as with their money and other kinds of possessions. If you aren't a subscriber, there's always a copy here at the church that you can read. If you'd like to be a subscriber, let me know.

I considered reading one of the stories from the magazine, but instead, I'll end with a story from a different source, a book titled *Making Waves*.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this story will inspire you to perform an act of generosity.

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:8-11, *The Voice*.

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 10:18-19, *The Voice*.

<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 25:35, *The Voice*.

<sup>15</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:12-15, *The Voice*.

<sup>16</sup> <https://anabaptistworld.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Judy Clemens, *Making Waves: Fifty Stories about Sharing Love and Changing the World*, Herald Press, 2020, pp. 115-117.

*Olivia Wright was nine years old when she saw a commercial for the organization Feed the Children. She was upset to realize that children on the television were not wearing shoes. They had bare feet and sad faces! These children were living so close to her home in Nashville, Tennessee. How was it that they didn't have any shoes?*

*She went to her parents and told them she wanted to do something to help these children. After some discussion, her parents agreed to help her. Together, they would make something happen.*

*Olivia organized a shoe drive at her church. She collected over 650 pairs! Olivia wanted to not only give the children shoes, but make a personal connection with them. So she traveled to Appalachia with the shoes and met the children there.*

*After this first drive, Olivia didn't want to stop. She founded H.U.G.S. which stands for Help Us Give Shoes. Their motto is "Shoeing the world, one smile at a time!" Olivia doesn't want to stop until everyone can walk with their feet protected. She started with the kids, but then realized that adults needed shoes too.*

*"We live in a place where shoes are a necessity," Olivia says. "Without shoes many children are denied the ability to go to school, have the possibility of dangerous penetration in their feet, and are susceptible to many life-affecting diseases, bacteria, and parasites. By giving children and adult shoes, we are not only keeping them safe; we're also showing them that they are loved and that someone somewhere cares about them enough to provide them with something they so desperately need."*

*In the years since H.U.G.S. began, Olivia and her organization have given away more than 100,000 pairs of shoes. Olivia's mission began in the Appalachian Mountains, and she continues to deliver shoes there twice a year. But Olivia is passionate about making sure to "shoe" many places in the United States. So she goes on as many local "shoeing" trips as she can. "It's more than meeting a need for shoes," she says. "It's about letting people know that someone does genuinely care. God cares. We care".*

Olivia helps us to realize that generosity can be expressed in many ways. When have you experienced the generosity of other people? When have you experienced the joy of being generous?

May we add our gifts to the gifts of other people who follow God's way. In that simple addition, may God's love be multiplied. Amen.