

## Generosity 8 – Generosity is repaid (2 Cor 9:6-11, Matthew 6:19-24)

It's Oct 21<sup>st</sup> so need to say this – Christmas is coming! Well, if you can't beat them, join them...

Wonder what your favourite Christmas film is? For many, it's 'It's a wonderful life' – many of us know story well – centres on George Bailey, a man who has spent his life helping others. One Christmas Eve he begins to feel it was all wasted and contemplates taking his own life. Cue the entrance of his guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody, who shows him what his town of Bedford Falls would have been like without his kindness. George suddenly sees that he has borne great fruit, the whole town has been affected by his investment of himself. He has sown generously, and everyone has reaped generously.

The story of George Bailey is a brilliant intro to today's passage – because it's all about where we sow, what we're investing in. Where is your life invested? Where are your treasures invested? And which George are you – the one that fears it's not been worth it, or the one that knows in your heart that it is?

Today's passage is one of those great ones that cuts to the chase – it doesn't mess around, it gets to the heart of a basic life principle. And it's a simple principle, one which you'll find in many worldviews: **'You reap what you sow'** – READ v6.

Now, at the start, I want to address one very basic question some of you will have – is this just karma by another name? Hindu idea that you get in the next life what you deserve from this one – 'what goes around comes around'. No, for 3 reasons: (1) Paul's advice is about this life – we reap *here* what we sow here; (2) we must never forget that the gospel starts with grace – only way to know God is through Jesus Christ, we gain forgiveness through his death and resurrection. In other words, in terms of the next life – or rather eternal life – the good news of Christ is that we *don't* reap what we sow, not if we trust in Jesus. This is a principle for *after* we've become Christians, not how we get saved.

Taking this same idea further, (3) grace and mercy continue to work in our lives. God is merciful – sometimes my best sermons are the quickest prepared. Usually that's when some other crisis has arisen and God is merciful. Sometimes one short prayer is answered spectacularly. Sometimes one little act reaps a huge benefit. There is a mystery here, and in everything I say next, what I don't want you to come away with is some sort of idea of life or God as a slot machine – put something in, get something out. Grace trumps everything! It always does!

But, that said, one thing St. Paul always want his readers to come back to is that grace is not cheap grace. The idea that once we've believed in the mercy of God expressed through Jesus Christ, that we can just coast along to heaven. Grace cost Jesus *everything*, and love is defined as living like Jesus, i.e. selfless giving – so yes, we always come back to grace, but it's not like the fundamental principles of life can just be ignored – principles like 'we reap what we sow'. That remains true.

However, it is reinterpreted a bit. As we've seen, it's no longer about salvation, and it's also a positive principle. Usually when we use that phrase in society, it's negative isn't it?

We usually use it when someone gets their just desserts, gets their come-uppance – and we think ‘you reap what you sow’.

But here it’s a positive principle. Sow a little, reap a little. Sow a lot, reap a lot. It’s the carrot, not the stick. If you want a lot of reaping in your life, then you need a lot of sowing!

In that sense, St. Paul’s advice takes what Jesus says in Matthew 6 a stage further. Jesus says, ‘Your heart is where your treasure is.’ So make sure your treasure is being invested eternally. And I think in our materialistic Western culture, we all need to be asking ourselves this question regularly: where’s my treasure – which as Jesus says, is another way of saying ‘where’s my heart?’ Our culture gets under our skin, and as humans we’re very good at finding excuses for hoarding stuff, or indulging our pleasures! Let’s be honest, we all do it – and God isn’t against us enjoying this world, but Jesus always gets us back to the main point – ‘where’s your heart?’ Has comfort or wealth got a grip on your heart? Is it stopping you being fully surrendered to him?

But 2 Cor 9 does take this on a stage further, because it moves beyond the heart to the *fruit* of where your treasure is. It doesn’t just ask the question ‘are you sowing?’ it asks ‘how and where are you sowing it, and how much?’ Sow a little, reap a little; sow a lot, reap a lot.

It takes us back to that question I asked a few weeks ago: *who wants to enjoy more of God’s blessings?* Sow more for him and you’ll reap more. That’s the promise. In case the Corinthians didn’t get it, Paul said it twice more: READ v9 and in case they still didn’t get it READ v11.

Notice that to sow generously releases more resources to keep giving generously. What we reap is not meant to be held onto – everything we have is God’s anyway. This is the big difference with what’s known as the prosperity gospel movement, which takes these verses and assumes our reaping is for *our* benefit. No, what we have here is a virtuous circle where we sow generously to reap generously and then to sow again. The blessing keeps on passing round.

**In the end, it comes down to this: God always repays. Always.** Think about those examples I shared in my sermon on tithing a few weeks ago – and if you haven’t read it it’s on the website, I would urge everyone to do so, I still think tithing is a foundational principle for Christians that I’d like everyone to engage with. If you want a paper copy just let me know and I’ll print one out for you... but back to those examples I shared – sometimes the repayment was quick, other times it took a few years – but God *always* repaid our decision to be generous, and keep being generous, whatever our personal circumstances.

**Giving is never a future thing.** I hear a lot of people say: ‘when I earn some real money then I’ll give generously’. But God never works like that – He’s interested in the now. The truth is that very few people who earn serious money actually do that anyway – Jesus isn’t lying when he talks about the power of money to grab a human heart. That’s why mammon is the only idol he tackles directly as being totally opposed to God. It’s why the only thing that matters is what you do now, in this season of your life.

But as I close I think there's a hidden thing here: I think deep down many of us are not sure we believe the basic principle that St Paul is sharing here. I think many people privately wonder: if I do that, if I really commit to sow generously, will God *really* look after me? Will it be worth it?

I would say be honest and say that you do have your George Bailey moments, those dark nights when you do question – obeying this principle is an act of faith like any other. Like praying, or serving a cause where the outcome can be uncertain. But all I can say, as I did a few weeks ago – **it really works. I have seen in my own life that God always repays.** It may be quickly, it may take a while – but He always does. The God, whose very being is grace, is gracious to us. We can trust Him.

And in the end everyone wins. We win as we experience more blessing in our lives, not least the great joy of giving – which is another of those great biblical truths, it is not just more blessed to give than receive, but also more enjoyable. And *others* win too. The church in Jerusalem won because the church in Macedonia and Corinth gave generously. And now, here, many around us will win if we give generously. And *God* wins, as he sees the great joy of his people doing what he intended and being the church.

A final thought – in 361 the pagan emperor Julian published a diatribe against Christians. His main complaint: 'not only do Christians look after their own poor', he said, 'they look after everyone else's as well'! That is what sowing generously looks like. May God grant us grace to find our treasure in generosity, our joy, and our reaping too. Amen.