

Enduring Principles Series

Grace and Generosity

by David R. Brock

“...not by commandment or constraint.”—Doctrine and Covenants 163:9

Have you heard some of these declarations? “The majority of the world lives on less than two dollars a day; surely you can afford a few bucks to support the congregational budget.” “Habitat for Humanity needs volunteers. You know, your garage is bigger than the home of most families in developing nations.” “Remember: The Lord loves a cheerful giver!”

And, have you, like I, said similar things, hoping they might motivate? A little command, a little guilt to stir yourself or another to action. But how much generosity has this approach instilled?

Not much, would be my guess!

Commandment and constraint *do* work for short periods. It is hard, for example, to see images of suffering for the first time and not respond to the imperative to give. It is hard to see the pastor on her knees scrubbing the church kitchen without an internal voice telling us to kneel and lend a hand. And, I still feel the nudge to be more generous when I hear the campfire chant: “File your statement, pay your tithing, bring your increase up!”

But true generosity is motivated “not by commandment or constraint.” Grace, like love, is best not commanded but left to the discretion of persons involved.

“Faithful disciples respond to an increasing awareness of the abundant generosity of God by sharing according to the desires of their hearts.”

“Break free of the shackles of conventional culture that mainly promote self-serving interests.”

Conventional culture is at times as crass as “get while the getting is good,” and, “If you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” We bargain with each other and with God to “get what we have coming to us.” Yes, we humans can be that blatantly self-serving.

But much conventional wisdom also is good and true! Ancient proverbs endure because there is timeless wisdom within. The reality they reveal is that if we live a grateful life, we’ll get benefit; we’ll be blessed:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.—Malachi 3:10 NRSV

[G]ive, and it will be given to you. A 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.—Luke 6:38 NRSV

Recent research suggests that people who are more grateful are happier, less depressed, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives and social relationships. They demonstrate higher levels of personal growth, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Grateful people cope better with difficulties. While many emotions and personality traits are important to well-being, evidence indicates gratitude may be uniquely important.

Beloved preacher and professor, Fred Craddock, wrote: “I have never known a person grateful, who was at the same time small, or mean, or bitter, or greedy, or selfish, or took any pleasure in anybody else’s pain. Never.”

Generosity and gratitude have their own rewards; not just for others, but for us as well, when we live generous lives. But that is not the heart of the matter; that is not the source of or motive for generosity.

It is not possible to “calculate” our gratitude, wrote Danny Belrose in *Wave Offerings* (p. 23): “How do you calculate generosity?”

How is it measured? You don’t and you can’t! Generosity lives in the heart...generosity is our joyful response to God’s generosity toward us. Its governing spirit is not formulas but thankfulness.”

Eternal joy and peace await those who grow in the grace of generosity that flows from compassionate hearts without thought of return.



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Reflection and Discussion

Discernment Activity

How does the “grace of generosity” look in real time, in flesh-and-blood persons, in tiny, struggling congregations? Lisa King-Reed of Oregon, USA, shares:

You should see our little church here in Roseburg. The land surrounding our small building has been returned to life with our Eastside Community Garden project. We have made 20x20-foot garden plots on three sides, and all are being used by community families to grow organic produce. The small front yard is going to be turned into a park area with a couple of picnic tables....

The congregation is very small: six families. I don’t know whether we’ll add to the congregational size through this project, but we are certainly adding to our spiritual health. It’s making us all soooo happy to see the land being used productively. Hope it lasts for years.

As do I! “May the Lord give you increase [Roseburg Congregation], both you and your children” (Psalm 115:14 NRSV).

Could it be otherwise in the domain of God, who eternally gives all for the sake of creation?”

An attempt to organize an offering for the saints in Jerusalem is the setting for II Corinthians 8–9, in which the apostle Paul again and again refers to charis, the Greek word variously translated as “grace,” “generous undertaking,” “goodwill,” “favor,” “blessing,” “privilege.” Perhaps in no other place in the scriptures is God’s freely given, overflowing, beyond-measure *charis* expressed so movingly. There may be no finer expression of how God’s grace moves the recipients to respond abundantly to others. I recommend it for our reading and reflection.

Paul said to the saints at Corinth: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9 NRSV). Paul understood, wrote J. Paul Samplly in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* (p. 122), that “believers do and give because they have been done unto and been given to. ... Believers cannot fail to love, because love received prompts love in return.”

Augustine of Hippo, a primal voice in early Western Christianity, also was captured by this God of immeasurable, unfathomable generosity. In chapter ten of his Confessions he wrote, “But what do I love when I love you, Lord?...when I love [God], I do love a certain kind of light, a voice, a fragrance, a food, an embrace; but I love them in my inner self, where there shines a light not bound by space, where my soul hears a sound that never fades away and breathes a fragrance the wind cannot disperse, tastes food not consumed by the eating and welcomes an embrace that satisfies my desire but never grows slack. This is what I love when I love God.”

Bishop Paul Davis recently wrote the high priests of the church on the subject: “Both God’s grace and God’s generosity must be humbly received before anything else can happen.

Neither of them can begin to work on someone who believes he already has everything and is going to give it to others.”

My friend, Jim Hannah, said: “It’s all response. The real answer to ‘How might I become a more generous disciple?’ is inseparably linked...with the question, ‘How can I draw closer to God?’”

Give generously according to your true capacity.

We shared in the baptism of eight-year-old Kyle in our congregation recently. It was nothing less than wonderful! Everyone who joins the body of Christ should have such a moment and memory to mark their entrance into the path of discipleship. So much investment of time, talent, and love in the preparation and planning of the worship that day!

Pastor Jim stood with Kyle to lead us in one of Kyle’s favorite songs from vacation church school. Octogenarians, who usually don’t worship by clapping and doing hand motions, stood and joined in. Images of Kyle flashed on a screen as we listened to a hymn, “Ready for You,” before Jim led him into the waters of baptism.

While we awaited Kyle’s return to the sanctuary, Carla, a member of the congregation, shared about his gifts, skills, hobbies, personality, and why he wanted to be baptized. All this came from an interview at his home earlier in the week. She then gave him a gift, a plant in an old work shoe, reminiscent of a special scene depicting friendship and preservation of life in his favorite movie, *WALL-E*.

From the name printed in the bulletin; to the font filled with water; to the upraised hand of pastor and friend, Jim; to the towel and changing room; to the presentation of Kyle as person, as equal to all members and friends gathered; to the singer who offered “I Can Only Imagine;” to the moment after the service when Kyle thanked everyone who came by shaking their hands and giving them a chocolate with an announcement of his baptism day on the wrapper, I realized that this once-in-a-lifetime moment was made possible only by the generosity of generations of people, including those who on this day helped bring to fruition an experience that by God’s grace became sacrament.

We generously share our witness, resources, ministries, and sacraments according to our true capacity. And, in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God says to all of us a phrase we need to hear again and again: “My grace is sufficient for you.” “My grace is sufficient for you.” “My grace is sufficient for you.”

May the enduring principle of grace and generosity define the essence and heart and soul of our church identity, mission, and message; our personality as people of God.

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