



The Gospel that Gives

Sermon – Aiden Sibrava – 10 & 17 July

Galatians 6:1-10

Introduction

Today we're going to think about *generosity*... the generosity that is created by the Gospel. So first we'll **define** 'Gospel generosity.' Then we'll look at the **purpose** of Gospel generosity. And, lastly, we'll see a **priority** in Gospel generosity.

But before all of that, I actually want to start with 'philosophy' because philosophy is upstream of action. Humans rarely behave without reason—although 2 Peter 2:12 says that in our corruption, it's possible—but usually what sets us apart from the animals is that we are creatures of intellect, not just instinct. We *think*, and then we *do*. That's the 'going assumption' of the criminal justice system. It's why we hold people responsible for their actions... because people are more than just animals operating on instinct.

So let's talk about philosophy. When we talk about philosophy, that's the whole system of how we understand the world. And **philosophy** has consequences.

I was struck by that thought after watching Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Rope* with Ryan the other day.

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the morally transcendent superman, the *ubermensch*, may not have been intended to culminate in death camps or libertine killers (like in *The Rope*) but, nevertheless, it did. Millions of human lives have been cut short, aided and abetted (at least in part) by Nietzsche's philosophy. Though in fairness to Nietzsche, I should point out that his most destructive work, *The Will To Power*, is a product of his

sister, Elisabeth, and friend, Peter Gast, claiming to work from his notes. (That's just so that I don't get any poison pen letters from the philosophers in the room.) But my point is that philosophy has consequences. Ideas aren't just toys to be played with... *they matter*. What you believe about the world will shape the action you take in the world.

That's St. James' whole point when he writes in his letter that faith is seen by its deeds. **James 2:18**. What you believe about the world will shape the action you take in the world.

And, of course, that leads us to the conclusion that not only *philosophy* has consequences, but also *theology*. That is, what you believe about God (your theology) will shape what you do in the world. **Theology has consequences!** And as St. Paul writes his letter to the Galatian church, we see this reflected over and over again.

When the Galatians were a young church (or churches), having first heard of the grace of God in Christ, they were generous. The grace of God in their heart created outward generosity. We saw it in chapter 4:13:

...it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, ¹⁴ and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. No, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. ¹⁵ Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.

It's pretty clear from his letters that Paul was afflicted with blindness.

In his conversion in Acts 9, he experienced that great optical trauma of the light from heaven when Jesus spoke to him; a light so bright he was blinded for three days, until finally, when he was baptised, 'something like scales fell from his eyes.' (Acts 9:18) You

ask your optometrist what sort of optical trauma that indicates. This blindness might explain Paul's 'thorn in the flesh,' his reliance on scribes for his letters or 6:11 where he says, behold what large letters (plural) I write with my own hand (*alpha, beta, gamma...*). So it's not surprising that in describing their past generosity, Paul said in chapter 4 that if the Galatians could have, they would have given him their eyes. It's not a normal way to welcome a guest, is it? Have a seat. Want a drink? How about an eyeball? But for a man that you loved, becoming blind, sure, you might offer him your eyes... if you could.

Whereas when their theology changed—to a theology of works-based legalism—they became *mean*. "Where is your blessing of me now?" Paul asked.

And in the end of this letter, having sought to reorient their theology back to one of *grace in Christ*, and *freedom* from the condemning power of the law; Paul once again spells out the consequences of their theology. In this last chapter, he describes a **deep Gospel generosity** which comes about because of who God is, and what God has done.

Gospel Generosity

You see it reflected in 6:1.

*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin (don't pick up rocks), you who live by the Spirit should restore that person **gently**. But **watch yourselves**, or you also may be tempted. ² **Carry each other's burdens**, and in this way you will fulfil **the law of Christ**.*

You see, Gospel generosity is foreign to self-righteous, judgemental attitudes.

Paul's just described what it means to turn away from sin and to live by the Spirit, in ch. 5. But because we all fail to do that in different ways, Paul tells us how to react. He says we're to *help*. When someone struggles with sin, that's not an invitation to kick

them while they're down. We're to help. And we help in humility, knowing that *that could be me just as easily*. Paul says, "watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted." See, we never stand over another Christian as though we're some kind of morally superior being. We are *all* sinners, saved by grace. Paul says, *bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfil the law of Christ*. A generous spirit is needed even in how we respond to sinful behaviour; but not only then... a generous spirit ought to characterise the Christian life.

What does it mean to be a Christian, who believes what Paul says in Galatians? Well at least part of it is what he says in verse 3 - it's to ***bear one another's burdens***. And you could write books about what *that* ought to mean. But I'd suggest there's at least 3 key things:

1. It means life in community. You can't bear one another's burdens if there's no 'one another.'
2. It means taking notice. What are the burdens you're burdened with? What are my burdens? What are theirs? If we live in our own head and never take notice, then our community will not be a generous community... because we won't know *how*. It sounds obvious, but you can't help if you don't notice what someone needs help *with*.
3. The 3rd thing we need is what's called 'moral imagination'. This is a lost art in the modern church. It's asking the question, *what could I do about that... that 'thing' that I noticed because I do life in a Christian community?* Ancient Christians built catacombs to protect one another. They built hospitals. They built schools. At their best, they took up arms in defence of the weak. At their worst, they killed. They created leagues to end slavery; they built orphanages and hostels and palliative care homes. Not *apart* from the Gospel, but *because* of the Gospel. "As I have loved you, so also you are to love one another," Christ said.

But what could 'moral imagination' look like in our day and age? Does it mean throwing our political weight around so that the secular government will build God's kingdom? Or could we be thoughtful employers, ourselves? Thoughtful investors? Could we come up with new modes of work, or community, or education, or healthcare, or housing, or the ten thousand other opportunities out there that no one's even thought of yet, because we haven't trained our moral imagination?

Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfil the law of Christ. You could write books about that. Maybe we haven't written enough. Maybe we could think harder about what it will mean to practise generosity.

But not just for its own sake. Let's think about...

Generosity with a Purpose

Because generosity is not just an end in itself. It's not just about 'making a connection'; it has a purpose.

Paul writes in verse 7:

*⁷Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. **A man reaps what he sows.** ⁸Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹**Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.***

You see, generosity isn't *just* a 'nice' thing to do because we're 'nice' people. No, there is a spiritual principle in play. Helpfully, it's also an agricultural principle. Paul says, *as a man sows, so too shall he reap.*

You see it in farming all the time. You run a plough down the field, then you harrow it, before you finally load up your seed drill and sow the paddock... set up your irrigator (I'm a fan of a good centre

pivot myself) and away you go. Now here's a question for you. At harvest time, what are you going to get out of that field?

Whatever you put into it. As a man sows, so too shall he reap. If you sow cotton, you're not going to get corn. But Paul says that's not just a farming principle; it's a *life* principle.

In fact Paul goes as far as to apply that to *destruction* and *life*. Sow to the flesh, he says, reap destruction. Sow to the Spirit, reap eternal life. But is Paul now somehow saying that 'good works' are what save us? "Sow to the Spirit, reap eternal life?" It wouldn't make sense, would it? Like, after he's spent so much time saying it's **Christ alone** who saves us. But... I wonder if it's more of an observation? He's not saying, "you can save yourself through good works," but he is saying that the one who is saved will do good? Just as the field with the corn seed will grow corn... so it's more a way of seeing who is on the path of life, or the path of destruction... you ask, *what seed are they sowing?* And to know what they're sowing, just look at the fruit.

It'd make sense, because, remember what we said at the start? *Theology has consequences.* What you believe *will* shape what you do. And if it doesn't, it's because you don't really believe it. But if you have the spirit of God, by which you cry, "Abba, Father!", my Saviour! – then that will play out in your works as well. As we walk in the Spirit of Christ our saviour.

So it's an observation. But you can go further with it, right? Because observation is the foundation of all good wisdom. *I did that... that happened.* Hmm. OK. So if it's true that the one who sows to the Spirit will reap life, and the one who sows to the flesh will reap destruction... How then should we 'sow'? How should we invest our lives and our time, and our conversations, and our mind, and our money, and all the rest of it? Well, if you want to be impactful, invest in a way that honours God.

Now I think that's not *just* about giving to church... although that was how Martin Luther read these verses.

You can tell a lot about a bible translation based on where it separates paragraphs, because the early manuscripts didn't have them. Verse 6 says, "the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor." The NIV separates that from Paul's comments on sowing and reaping. The Society for Biblical Literature's Greek New Testament, which is one of the key manuscripts from which our Bibles are translated, doesn't. It puts verse 6 in the paragraph on sowing and reaping. So it says, *All good things should be shared between the learner of the word and the teacher of the word. Don't be mistaken, God is not mocked. For what a man sows, the same shall he reap.* That's why Luther linked the two together - supporting ministry, and sowing-and-reaping.

But it kind of makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, if someone is out there preaching the Word and you support their ministry, what's going to happen? They can keep ministering, more people hear, and more people share in eternal life. That much is blindingly obvious. Where I think we need to have *wisdom* is in evaluating the ministries we support. Because there are people out there who'll say, *If you give me money, you will be blessed.* "Sow to the Spirit, reap eternal life." But that's not necessarily true—unless they're a person who *is* actively blessing others. You see when you support someone, you support whatever they support. And if they are committed to the ministry of leading people to eternal life, then yes - *the one who sows to the Spirit will see a harvest of life.* If they're committed to their own gain, *the one who sows to the flesh will see a harvest of destruction.* Be discerning!

But not just in supporting ministries, because this is a wider spiritual principle. It doesn't just apply to how we spend our money on ministry, but, like I said, we ought to think about how we invest our own lives, and our time, and our conversations, and our mind, and our money, and all the rest of it, in light of this principle.

And that's why Paul brings it back to all of us in verse 10. It's not just about ministry and ministers, it's about how all of us live our Christian lives. He says:

¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Priority

Paul says that there's a **priority** in Gospel generosity... that it's expressed towards the church first and foremost... not the building or the budget, but the people. There is a kind of 'holy nepotism' where Paul calls us to care for those who are in the family of God. But it's not at the cost of everyone else because, as he says: *let us do good to all—especially those of the household of faith.* So although there should be a kind of care and love towards fellow believers that prioritises them, that's not at the expense of 'doing good to all.'

So again, it calls for 'moral imagination'. What will it mean for us to live in a way where we seek to 'do good to all'?

I don't have time to tell you all of the things that might mean, but that *might* be a good thing. Because part of what I'm saying here today is that I hope **you** will cultivate **your own** sense of 'moral imagination'. You know right from wrong. You know what it means to sow to the flesh, you know what it means to walk by the Spirit. You know the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus, who died and rose so that all who call on his Name may live...

So... that's your homework. Developing a moral imagination doesn't finish with this sermon. It'll take time, and reflection, and prayer. So take the time to think about it. What will it mean for you to 'sow to the spirit'? You'll have opportunities that I don't. So only you can answer that question, as you prayerfully bring it to the Lord. Let's pray now. But don't let it be the last time you pray about how you might live out *gospel generosity*. OK?