2 Corinthians 9:1-9

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[0:00] My name's Tim. We're going to be opening the Bible together. We're continuing our series called Generous through 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

! If you've got a Bible with you, if you want to turn there, that will help you in a moment. Just before we get into that, I'd like to give you a brief notice if that's okay.
Okay. Some of you will have picked up that this evening we are having our first Sunday Bible study. So it should be half past seven this evening in this room.
I'm very excited about it. And I think two or three of you are as well, which is good. I'd like to tell you why we're doing it, and then you can decide for yourself whether you want to come or not.
But in my last church in Birmingham, my absolute favorite thing that we did was mine and Helen's life group, when we would have about 12, 14, sort of 20-year-olds gather into our home, sit around our table.
[1:01] We'd eat together, and then we'd just open the Bible. We'd read a couple of chapters. We'd ask the same three questions every time. And we'd just see what the Bible had to say to us.

And over several years, this group came alive with the Scriptures, came alive in their ability to just go, Oh, my word, that's Jesus. That's Jesus. That's Jesus.
As we read through Exodus very, very slowly, in wonder at how well-written Scripture is, in wonder at what it would say to us, in challenge at some of the very difficult things that we came across. And essentially, the Sunday Bible study is my attempt to go, I wonder if you can scale that up to a church. That's what we're aiming for. I suspect we won't quite get it right tonight, if I'm honest.
I'm hoping it'll be good, but I think it'll take us some time to kind of figure out exactly how does this work in a slightly larger setting. There'll be lots of round tables in this room. You'll be sat, if you come, on a table with other people.
[2:02] We'll ask those same three questions. We're going to read the first chapter of Ruth tonight, and then we'll ask those same three questions that we'll ask every single time. You'll talk about manual tables. We'll talk together. My expectation is that we will meet Jesus in the pages, because that's what happens when we open the Bible.

I'm not going to preach. I'm going to ask questions. We'll have some dialogue. We'll see what Jesus says to us. We'll attempt to allow the Bible to ask its questions of us. That's the whole agenda. And hopefully two or three of you might come and join me. But like I say, it'll take us a few times to figure it out. I don't think it will necessarily feel like coming to my dining room. I'd love it if we could figure out how to do that, but that sounds kind of complicated.
But why don't you consider it? Half past seven tonight. Probably take us around about an hour and a half. Hopefully get us so excited by Jesus, we'll end with a song or two, but we'll see. All right.
Okay. What we're doing today, though, 2 Corinthians chapter 9, just to remind you of the scene. So we're nearly at the end of this series thinking about generosity. But Paul is writing to this church from a place called Corinth to say, the church in Jerusalem need our help.
[3:10] They're hungry. There's a famine. Could you donate to that? And he's telling them why they should. And most of that isn't about the fact that they're hungry. It's about the gospel and about what generosity means and looks like.

So let me read to you. 2 Corinthians chapter 9. I'm going to start at the start. Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints. For I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them.
But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be.

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Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you're not ready, we would be humiliated to say nothing of you for being so confident. For I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not an exaction.
The point is this. Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.
[4:29] Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

As it is written, he has distributed freely, he has given to the poor, his righteousness endures forever. This is the word of the Lord. So, what's Paul saying?
He starts off with this actually quite extended passage, where he's basically saying, I've said you're going to give really well, I'm going to look really stupid if you don't. And then he turns and says, you know what, but that's actually, that's not really a reason for you to give.
We'll come back to that in a minute. But he, in the middle of that, wants to help them understand a principle. He says, verse 6, the point is this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.
In other words, you reap what you sow. Just picture the kind of scene he's talking about. Imagine you've got a field, and you've got some seed in your hands.
[5:50] At the very simplest level, the more of that seed you put in the ground, the more crop you are going to have to do something with. And that is, on the face of it, that's kind of obvious wisdom.

I'm sure the farmers in the room would tell me it's much more complicated than that. But, you know, on the face of it, you put seed in the ground, crops grow up, the more of the seed that you put in, the more crop that you have, why wouldn't you sow all that you have?
That's his point. What you sow, you will reap. What does that mean for us? Because one of Paul's points is, don't just eat other people's crops.
I wonder if you're ever tempted to do that. There's this principle in the Old Testament called gleaning, where if you happen to have a field and you're growing crops, they said you should leave the edge of the field for the poor.
Not everything that you sow, you take for yourself. You leave some of it for others. But, that isn't the same thing as saying you should go, you know what? All these people have got a lot of stuff.
[6:56] Maybe I'll just eat their crops. He's saying, sow what you have and you'll reap from it. There's a kind of investment principle. You get what you put in.

Church life is like that. I wonder if some people might sometimes be tempted to essentially, as it were, eat other people's crops.
To be like, those people, they put in loads of stuff. I'll just enjoy what there is in the church. Now, on the one hand, maybe we are talking about money, but as we keep making a point with this graphic, sure, treasure and money is some of it, but we're also talking about our time and our talents and our gifting.
We get out what we put in. Do you want to invest? That's kind of the question that Paul would want us to consider for ourselves in the church.
Do you want to invest? You will get out what you put in. Think about it like this. Think about it like this.
[7:59] Everything you have is already God's. Your money's God's, your time's God's, your home's God's, the talents and gifts that he's given you are God's.

They're gifts from the Lord. And he's saying, why don't you invest them? Why don't you see what you're able to get back with them?
Why don't you deliberately do your best to put them to good use? Don't be the sort of person that has a field and a handful of seed and goes, you know what, I'm slightly scared that if I sowed it all I wouldn't have any.
What if the weather's bad? What if it goes wrong? It might. Ask any farmer. It really might. He's saying, sow everything in your hand.
See what will come. And we've been, I think, relatively careful in this series talking about generosity to not just say, hey, the church needs your money.

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[9:01] I mean, I imagine we all know to some extent that is true. We've got one organization, it has some costs, but that's not really what we're getting at. It's saying, generous hearts are what the Lord is after.

But it is worth us remembering, where does God keep his money? So God's got enough money to do all the things he wants to do. But where does he keep his money?
He keeps it in your bank account. Which is really nice when you think about someone else's and not quite so fun when you start to think about your own. Jesus told this story in Mark chapter 10, verse 28.
He said, Jesus looked at them, oh, sorry, no, Mark chapter 10, verse 28. Peter began to say to him, see, we have left everything and followed you.
And Jesus said, truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the gospel who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions and in the age to come eternal life.
[10:14] Jesus says those who give things up for him will get back a hundredfold. Okay. I think it's quite easy to hear that and think some kind of prosperity gospel thing where you go, if I give something up for God, I'll give a hundredfold.

I wonder if you've ever thought about, if you were, for example, to in some fashion give up your home for the Lord, I know what that feels like. where do these hundred homes that Jesus promises you that he says, no, in this time, where do they come from?
So it doesn't suddenly mean I don't own a hundred houses. Where are my hundred homes? Have you ever thought about that? They belong to you.
The hundred homes and fields and children and lands and mothers and brothers and all the rest of it that the Lord says you get belong to the church. When he says you reap what you sow, it's not like, oh, if I give what I have, oh, I'll get double back.
I mean, you will in the sense that the church will share with you. You will in the sense that you'll discover that you've become part of a body of people who have things that they're willing to share with you because you've also shared with them.
[11:33] It's not suddenly that you empty your bank account and then it doubles. But it is that you find yourself in a community that gives to each other that is generous.

Several of you have asked why this graphic is a stick of rock, which I must admit I thought was more obvious than it obviously is. The point being that one of our values as a church is that we're to be generous people.
It's supposed to be written through the middle of us. We're to be a people who are generous to each other. So Paul says to them, you reap what you sow. This is what his heroes are expecting to hear. This is quite a normal cultural idea that you would give to get back. The thing is, Paul doesn't mean I give 10 pounds, I get 20 back.
Paul means whatever I give of myself, financially, time, gifting, use of my home, whatever it might be, he says, you get that back from God.
[12:29] You get that back in spiritual fruitfulness. You get that, which is Colossians chapter 2. You get that back in the church bearing your burdens, Colossians chapter 6. You invest in the future by putting your time and your money and your gifting into what?

Lust, into the kingdom. So that's the first principle, excuse me, that he wants to give them. You reap what you sow. But you see, there's something bigger underlying this chapter because he started off with, I'm going to be, I'm going to have egg on my face.
I've kind of boasted about the fact you're going to give. I probably over-egged it slightly, kind of hoping that you're going to kind of rise to the occasion. You will reap what you sow. But then he says to them, so that you may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.
And that's verse 5. And in verse 7 he says, each one must gift as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. That seems to cut the other way.
Let me tell you a story to maybe help you get some sense of this. Helen and I used to be part of a church in Nottingham. This was long before I was part of the leadership there. But we used to meet in Notts County Football Ground, oldest football club in England.
[13:49] But immediately you're picturing an enormous church meeting on the pitch, but we met in a little kind of conference room you could get to down the side. Maybe, I don't know, maybe about

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100 of us at this point started to outgrow this space.

Kids' work was in some of their other smaller conference rooms, including some kids in the bar with the sticky floor. It's, you know, it's not ideal. It's time to think, could we get ourselves a facility? How might this work?
And you're starting to explore stuff. We're quite early days of this. And then our church leaders call an emergency meeting. And they're like, we need to talk about something around this search for property.
I'm sorry, it's like they just had to put something in the diary and say, just come if you can. And we had a meeting in that sticky bar down at the bottom of Notts County. It was quite dark. It smells of stale beer.
And I think the smoking ban had just come into place, but there's still that kind of scent of cigarette smoke in the air. And the leader at the time, he outlines, we've just discovered this facility that, I actually think it might work for us, this old Ministry of Labour building on the edge of the town centre that's got this enormous hall in the middle where people just used to come, kind of labourers used to come and get their day labour like a hundred years ago.
[15:06] It's not been used for anything for a long time. It's owned by the council. They want to sell it. So it's kind of in the middle of the recession. He said, it's sealed bid and we've got two weeks. And he's like, I'd really like to preach on giving kind of so we can get the Bible's ideas about this in this, but we've got guests speaking this week and we've got to do an offering the week after because we've got to do something on the Monday so I can't.

He's like, we can't, we're going to see if we can get you to see it before then but I don't know if we can. And you'd think at that point, you'd imagine he'd start to kind of pull into the Bible and go, look, we've got to give in to this and start to kind of help us see why it'd be good for us.
And he just kind of stood there and looked at this and said, you know what guys, you don't have to give a thing. You don't have to give a thing.
In fact, because he was a bit of a rogue, he got us to spend quite a long time at the meeting standing up chanting, we don't have to give a thing over and over and over again.
And you know what happens? Because we didn't have to give a thing, the gospel got into our hearts and so we opened our wallets.
[16:25] The week later, he couldn't preach on giving because we had a guy called Greg Haslam, some of you will know, used to be in Winchester and then at Westminster Chapel, coming to preach and he preached a message that was entitled, For God's Sake, Shoot!

from Two Kings. He didn't know about any of this and we were just like, oh, okay. And this is a young church, mostly students, no one had very much money but everyone just opened their bank accounts.
They came up with a sum, the other local churches in the city said, you can't afford this, have money and kind of gave us money. We put in a bid, it wasn't the biggest one, they gave us the building anyway. I don't really know why.
And they call it the ministry now, that building. It's right in the middle of Nottingham, serving the poor, actually helping people find jobs, which is ironic because of what it used to do. But why did that happen?
It happened because a small group of people believed the gospel and got grace into their hearts because you don't have to give a thing. Do you get that? I mean, I'm talking about generosity and saying you reap what you sow.
[17:27] That's true. But you don't have to give a thing. Will the Lord love you less if you don't give? No. You don't have to give a thing.

Paul says, you must give as deciding your heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion. If I stand up here and lay on a lot of, you know, if you give, this will happen, it will be very good for you. It's true, it will be good for you.
But you kind of lay it on thick and you start to feel, ooh. It's the opposite of what the Bible is telling us to do. You don't have to give a thing. Is it good for you to give?
Sure. Does the church need you to give in order to run? Yeah. Would I like to be able to pay my mortgage? Kind of would, yeah. But do you have to give anything? No. You really don't.
The Lord freely gives to you and he will continue to do so. It's what we call grace, right? It's absolutely ludicrous. He gives to you and you don't have to do anything in response.

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[18:25] And he's going to give to you again and again and again. It's not, Paul says, it's not exaction, that's verse 5. He means it's not wages. It's not like, God's given to me so I must give in response.

Is that a good response of your heart? Sure. But you have to. No. You don't have to give a thing. There's no compulsion. If you're reluctant, don't give. If you're already giving and you're not sure about it, stop.
Please. Genuinely, we don't want your money if you don't want to give it to us. The Lord doesn't want it either. And it might feel utterly self-defeating and there's a little part of me that sat in my office this morning thinking, are you really going to preach this to me?
But, it's true, right? You do not have to give a thing. After all, Paul says, I'll be kind of embarrassed if you don't, but you don't have to give anything.
That's how I'll feel too. I'll be, well, more than embarrassed. I might have to go get another job. But, you don't have to give a thing. What should you do?
[19:38] Seek joy. Seek joy in God that makes you want to go, you know what? Actually, actually, I don't have to give it a thing and so I want to. Please only give what you want to.

Does the Bible say, you know, 10% is a good guy? Sure. But do what you want to do. Do what the Lord is birthing in your heart. Respond in grace. You don't have to do anything.
which means, I mean, if you like, you can stay on the sidelines. One of the reasons we kind of planned this series is this church has grown a lot in the last kind of year, 18 months.
There's quite a lot of people on the fringe. It's just partly to help you be like, no, no, come in, give financially, come and serve, come and join in with what we're doing. Don't just come on a Sunday, be part of the body. You don't have to.
You can sit on the sidelines. I mean, if you can't, don't feel that you can give wholeheartedly here, I would encourage you to find a church where you can because that's better for you. And we are asking our fringe to kind of come and get involved and be part of us, but you don't have to.
[20:47] Grace is our motivator. The Lord has freely given to us. There are no wages. That's how good the gospel is, right?

I wonder if you get that. That Jesus has died for you to free you from sin, shame, death, and the curse of the enemy. All you have to do is trust him.
You don't have to do anything. Are there things that are good to do in response? Sure. Does he want more for us than that? Yes. But do you have to? No. No. Will you want to if you get that under your skin?
Yeah, I think so. But you have to want to. You have to want to. I started off this series, what was that, four or five weeks ago, saying that what we're looking for is a kind of inward resolve for what is God asking you to give next for each of us, just to consider.
What is God, where is he asking us to step forwards? And that's the right way of thinking about it. We're looking for free and unselfish giving of ourselves, of our time, of our money, of our resources, of our homes, of our talents and gifting.
[22:10] What do you want to do? And sometimes, okay, that does feel like, of course I don't actually want to give my money, Lord, but I kind of do want you more, and so, or I want to want you more, and so I'm going to choose to try and step into that.

Of course it does. Of course we're double-minded. Of course we have hugely mixed motives. Of course our hearts are confused about these things. Yeah, and you're sort of like, I'm kind of choosing to go with that bit of my heart that does want this and ignore that bit of my heart that doesn't.
Sure. But we're trying our best to give out of joy. We're trying our best to give because we want to. Because the Lord has freely given to us.
you don't have to give a thing. It's such good news. You don't have to give a thing.
And God says he loves a cheerful giver. I wonder if lots of you have heard that at a time when someone's passed a basket around and you think, is the point I'm supposed to plaster a smile on my face while I sort of wrench the cash out my wallet back in the days you used to do that?
[23:21] Like, yes, I'm very happy about this. That's not, that's not what he means. He means it's like you want to go, okay, on balance, I love the Lord, so go on, have it.

Why, have you ever wondered why God loves a cheerful giver? Why is that? Why is that the thing that he wants? Because God is a cheerful giver.

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And he wants us to be like him. God loves generosity because it reflects his character. He is generous.
How do we know that? Jesus didn't have to give you a thing. Do you see that?
No one made him. He didn't have to come to rescue you. He was not sitting there in heaven and being like, oh, all right then, because these idiots have gone and got themselves in such a pickle, I'm going to go and let them stick nails in my flesh in order to rescue them.
[24:46] His heart towards us was to look to the world and be like, these poor fools who are running the opposite way from me, who don't want me to save them, but I know that this is good for them.

I love them, says the Lord, and so I will choose to come like a comet descending from heaven to earth to smash through everything that holds them and allow myself to hang arms outstretched towards the world in order to die in their place.
He didn't have to. He wanted to. He chose to. He did it long before we asked him to.
He knew what we needed and went before us. He was, if you like, a cheerful giver. There's this, I mean, the Bible doesn't say this, this is speculation, but I sort of wonder if as he's hanging on the cross and obviously in unbearable pain and feeling the weight of the curse settling on him, if just as he says it is finished, descends to the place of the dead.
We don't necessarily know quite what happens next, but I wonder if he laughs in joy at victory. This cheerful one who has won all things through great pain takes the keys out of the hand of the enemy, so he holds the keys of death and Hades as it says in the book of Revelation, and then leads a triumph of captives out of the place of the dead into the heavens with a smile on his lips because he's delighted at what he's won.
[26:45] No one made him. Jesus also believes that you reap what you sow and so he sowed his life and he reaped being crowned eternally as king of the world. He sowed his life in order to get treasure.

Have you ever thought about it like that? It says in the Gospels, the kingdom of heaven is like a man who finds treasure in a field and gives everything he has to buy it. We often think of that as us finding Jesus.
It is first Jesus finding us. He sees a field with treasure buried in the ground. I imagine it's a graveyard. And he thinks, I want that and so he gives everything he has to get our dead bodies and then raises us up with him.
You're the treasure. You're the treasure in the field. You're what Jesus reaps for everything that he sowed. You're what he wanted enough to go, this is worth it.
I am a cheerful giver. I want you. I want you. And so he wins us by doing everything for us.
[27:55] And you don't have to give a thing. What we're going to do now is Ben and the band are going to come and we're going to worship him.

And you can respond as you like, really, because you don't have to give a thing. But why don't we say thank you? to the one who's given everything for us.
Why don't we stand together? I'll pray and then we'll sing. Lord Jesus, we are grateful.
We do stand in wonder at the fact that you would give us everything because you love us.
That you judged us treasure worth having enough that you would give everything to win us. Would you get that in our skin, Lord?
[29:03] Would you get that into our bones? Would you help us believe it in our unbelief that you are you are a God of ludicrous grace. You are a cheerful giver who gives and gives and gives and gives.

Amen.

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