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## THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: GENEROSITY

2 Corinthians 9:8-15; Luke 19:1-10

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Several weeks ago, I received an email from a member of the church who said that we had made a mistake in the announcement about the sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. Not being too keen on mistakes, I thought to myself, "Oops, I hope I didn't mess it up." He said instead of *goodness* we had listed *generosity* as the sixth fruit of the Spirit. If you learned the names of the nine fruits of the Spirit as a child, you probably learned them as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *goodness*, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Yet, the New Revised Standard Version translates the Greek word (*agathōsynē*) as *generosity* instead of the more traditional *goodness*. Is it goodness or generosity?

The root of the word Paul uses has the core meaning of good. The idea of good has many dimensions. We can speak of good tasting food, a good painting, or a couple that are a good fit for one another. Good can mean something that is well-done, suitable, beautiful, or appropriate. When we speak of goodness as a fruit of the Spirit, we are speaking primarily in a moral or theological sense. Something is good because it is created by God, blessed by God, and filled with the goodness of God. Jesus said that God alone is good (Mark 10:17). All goodness

flows from God. Something is good because it is rightly ordered and fulfills God's good purposes. In the beginning, God declared the whole creation to be good. To be good is to fulfill the expectations of God who alone is good. Goodness does not mean moral perfection but living in a right relationship with God. The Spirit fills us with goodness so that we may fulfill God's good purposes for our lives and for the world.

King David has a good heart. He is far from perfect, but he trusts in the goodness of God and finds that goodness flowing into his life. A good heart is a generous heart. Goodness is not a static quality. Goodness overflows into a generosity of spirit. The prophet Samuel says that God rejected Saul and David is chosen because he is a man after God's own heart. David and Saul's son, Jonathan, are intimate friends – soulmates. David promises Jonathan that he will look after his family if anything were to happen to Jonathan. After Saul and Jonathan die in battle, David becomes king. David finds Jonathan's handicapped son Mephibosheth and invites him to sit at the King's table. Even though Saul has been David's enemy, David restores to Mephibosheth all his grandfather's goods and property. David has a generous spirit because he has a good heart.

Therefore, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates this fruit of the Spirit as generosity. It is the fruit of a transformed heart.

One day, Jesus goes to Jericho and meets Zacchaeus, a man who is despised by all. He is detested and scorned because he is a tax collector, a collaborator with the Romans. He is the chief tax collector and very rich. Luke suggests that he gained his wealth unjustly by extorting money from the people. When Luke tells us that Zacchaeus is a man of small stature, Luke is hinting that he is a man of a little spirit and a small heart. Yet, something in him makes him want to see Jesus. He throws off all concern about looking foolish before others and climbs a tree to see Jesus. Jesus sees him and declares that he is coming to stay at Zacchaeus' house.

When Jesus enters the home and the heart of a sinner, something changes. The outcast is restored as a child of Abraham. Like the Grinch whose small heart grew three sizes all at once, Zacchaeus finds his heart filled with the goodness and grace of God. This newfound goodness overflows into a wealth of generosity. Zacchaeus declares, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded

anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much" (Luke 19:8).

In the book, *The Paradox of Generosity: Giving We Receive and Grasping We Lose*, Christian Smith and Hilary Davidson studied the impact of generosity on the quality of life. They found that people who give their resources joyfully and freely, who volunteer their time, who stay emotionally and relationally connected to others, who practice kindness toward their neighbors, and who understand the importance of being generous live more abundant lives in terms of health, happiness, and a profound sense of purpose. The authors claim that generosity itself "is not means to these ends, but it is itself a mindset to be desired for its own good" (*Alban Weekly*, 10/19/15). A generous spirit is open to the world. A generous spirit is not controlled by fear, but by a desire to share with others the goodness of God.

Paul understands the mindset of generosity and the spiritual significance of generosity. In writing to the Corinthians, he is encouraging them to participate, along with the churches of Macedonia, in a ministry of relief to the faithful in Jerusalem who are undergoing a difficult time of need. Paul encourages them by focusing on the generosity of God who provides "every blessing in abundance" and who "scatters abroad [and] gives to the poor" (2 Corinthians 9:8,9). God's generosity enables our

generosity. The fruit of generosity is not only the ability and the desire to help others in need, but a rich harvest of faith and thanksgiving. We understand this when we consider how much joy we receive by what we give away.

This is why we emphasize generosity when we make a pledge to the ministry of Christ in the church. Generous givers make it possible for us to fulfill our mission to worship God, care for one another, nurture our children and youth, share the love of Christ with others, and support the many outreach ministries of this congregation. Pledging not only helps our officers be good stewards of our resources, but it has a profound spiritual impact on our lives. Making a pledge is an important spiritual practice and discipline. Pledging reminds us to keep God first as we give generously and consistently to Christ's ministry through the church. Every gift matters. Never fall into the trap of thinking that your gift is too small to matter. It is all about giving in proportion to what we have. Giving enlarges our lives and our hearts; giving allows the goodness of God to flow through us; giving awakens us to a rich harvest of thanksgiving. Maybe God is speaking to you today to become a more generous giver. Sometimes we say, "insofar as you are able." But I want to say, "insofar as God is able through us."

One Sunday afternoon when I was in elementary school, visitors

from our church came by our home to talk about our family's commitment to the church for the coming year. I don't remember a word of what they said, but I do remember our family of five children gathering with our parents in the living room to talk about pledging. Not only my parents, but each one of us made a pledge to the church. I don't remember if it was \$.25 cents a week or \$1.00 a week, but I do remember the act of signing the card and later receiving my own offering envelopes. At the time, it seemed like a fortune. The experience of making a commitment and discovering the joy of giving generously, out of what I had, has stayed with me all these years. I suspect that many of you have similar memories. Such memories may seem utterly insignificant, but they can shape a lifetime of generosity. Such memories awaken us to the goodness of God that overflows into a generosity of spirit.

We have before us on the table in the bread and wine the sign and seal of God's goodness and generosity. God satisfies the hungry heart with gifts of finest wheat. God gives us the bread of life to eat. God's gifts are poured out for us. The generosity of God overflows. God's goodness and generosity spill out from us to satisfy a hungry and thirsty world.