

Date: December 9-10, 2023

Title: Look Up - "Look Up for Generosity"

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Speaker: Kurt Bjorklund

Good morning! As you heard, Christmas services are starting next Tuesday. And for me, that always feels like the start of the elongated Christmas week. We love this time of year and what it means with so many people who are open spiritually in a way that they're not at other times. And so, we just encourage you, as you're part of the ministry here, to come to serve at a service, to invite friends one time, to invite family another time, and to treat it a little bit like our friends in Philadelphia treat voting. Come early, come often. And that'll be our attempt to serve this year.

Let's pray. God, thank you for a chance to gather. And Lord, I pray that you would speak today, that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and in emphasis. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, we set out to teach through Second Corinthians earlier this year and a little bit of next year. And I knew as we laid out the way the chapters fell in the different passages that chapter eight and chapter nine would follow these first couple of weeks of December. Certainly, I had the option to say well, I could set those aside, and we could do something more Christmasy. Especially because the themes of chapters eight and nine are both largely about giving. And you may say that doesn't feel very Christmasy. Shouldn't we talk about shepherds and wise men and you know, do the prototypical church message around this time of year that wise men still seek him? That was a joke. You guys are like, that's good. Write that down. And so, I had that moment of should we do this? Should we not?

Both of these passages, chapters eight and nine, have an emphasis on what Jesus' coming means. What a gift it is and then an emphasis a little bit about giving. But here's why I chose to leave these passages in here and talk about them this time of year. If you're like me, you get bombarded with solicitations to give. In fact, I counted a couple of years ago I had 24 individualized solicitations to either go to a fundraising event or to give to somebody whom we were personally connected with. This wasn't just like random things that we got, you know, dear resident, this was Kurt and Faith. Would you give specifically to this need? And it's really easy with that many individual solicitations to feel a little bit of giving fatigue. And I certainly don't believe that every time somebody asks that you're required to consider giving, there is a pacing to what we all need to do.

But Second Corinthians nine talks about generosity. And what I'd like to do, just for a few moments, is talk about four reasons why generosity is a good choice in life. And I want to say right up front, you heard Russ talk for a moment about our year-end giving. And so, we talk about this every year. Orchard Hill is funded through your giving during the year and then year-end giving. And giving generally goes to our projects. It's part of how we've built things around here and expanded campuses.

But if Orchard Hill isn't your church home, then I would just encourage you to hear this. Not about Orchard Hill, but to hear about just being generous. Even if you're not sure about

Jesus. Being generous is still a good thing in this world. So, choose something that you're saying I could be generous to this. And here's something else I've learned in years of being a pastor, and that is sometimes some people who maybe are part of the church will say wow, I don't like this about the church. And it's a way sometimes to avoid having to grapple with giving. And so, free permission to say this doesn't have to be given to Orchard Hill, okay, this is a spiritual issue between you and God that really doesn't have anything to do with Orchard Hill. And so, choose something else. If you have a little issue and say, what would it look like for me to be generous in this cause, even as you hear this today?

But let me just show you the reasons in Second Corinthians. And first, just let me show you at the end of verse nine this idea of Jesus being the gift that is part of the motivation. In verse 15, he says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" I believe he's talking here ultimately about Jesus. We'll see this because the context right before this says this. Paul, in writing this says God has given us a gift and here are some reasons to be generous.

The first one that I'm going to say is to be generous because it matters. We see this in verses one through five, specifically in verse two. It says, "For I know your eagerness to help..." That's a simple word. It just means to assist. Then he talks about the giving going to the Macedonians and the different parts of the enthusiasm of their action. And then in verse five, he says this. "So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given." And so, he talks about generosity, and how generosity helps.

And here's the simple reality, and that is, all of the different organizations, people who solicit for funds, are trying to do something that matters. And so, giving generously helps to resource those things. Now, as I said, I don't believe that every request is a necessary response, but there are a lot of things happening in this world, a lot of things happening through this church that are really important, and giving makes a difference.

And I realize if you drive on to our Wexford campus specifically, you may look and say oh Wexford, it seems like there's enough money here. Do they need money here at Wexford? And that's a fair comment. We're certainly not a poor church in that sense but let me just give you a little window behind the scenes. Earlier this fall, our CFO came into my office and said I have something to talk with you about and you're not going to like it. Anytime your chief financial officer comes in and says that you have a moment where you say okay, this is not good.

And what he said is our medical renewal rate came in and there's a \$200,000 increase from last year. Let's just say that, just to give you an idea, we have 50 employees. So, it's you know, proportional. It makes sense. And by the way, he was able to negotiate it down. So, we aren't paying quite that much for our medical renewal. But my point is that any organization, even if it looks like it has resources, has challenges in it, especially in an inflationary environment, and there are real costs. And in order to do the things that any ministry needs, there needs to be resources.

And if you were around when we talked about It's a Party, and we talked about the NextGen Wing here just at our Wexford campus, we said that since that first addition to the wing was

done before, the second story that we're putting on now, over 30,000 kids and students have been served by that. Counting each student one time for each year that they come. Think about the impact that could have in this world. Now, all of those students won't grow up and live in this area. Most of them will move to other places. But the way that the churches impacted them, pointed them to Jesus, pointed them to other things, is something that only the church can do. And so, it matters when you invest in what God is doing, whether that's here or somewhere else.

Now, in chapter eight, verse 19, where Paul was still writing to this same group, he says this. "What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help." And so, part of the eagerness to help was also saying we want to make sure that what we're giving to actually has an impact.

Here's why I point this out. It's easy sometimes, especially with funding, to paint a picture of everything that's going on. But I think there's a requirement in giving to say we're using money in a good way. And here's part of where this came from. When I started as a pastor, I went to this little church that called me, about 100 people at the time, and I think they had about 20 mission agencies and missionaries that they supported. And so, it was a big missionary roster for such a small church. And what they did is they gave, you know, a couple of hundred bucks, maybe a thousand bucks to a bunch of people over time. And what had happened is different people had come and maybe laughed and said, hey, my cousin Billy knows somebody who knows somebody who's doing a ministry. We should support them. And they're like alright, sure, we'll give a little money. And that's how the mission thing grew.

So, I set out as the new pastor and went to meet all these people. I wanted to see all the mission agencies in person. I set out to travel and see them. So, I went to Mexico and Europe. Most of them were in the United States. I regret that I never did make it to the one missionary that we had in the Fiji Islands. I should have started with that one. But it always seemed excessive to travel there. But here's what I found. Some people were doing great work that was underfunded, but then there were some who could tell a good story and were actually over-resourced. And the one that comes to mind is where I went, and they had five full-time people working and they were ministering, quote-unquote, to three people the year that I went because I started to press in and say how many people come to what you actually do?

And here's the thing. If we had five full-time people working in our student ministry here at our Wexford campus and three students coming, there would be some accountability. We would say that's simply not enough for how much time is being invested, and yet sometimes in missions that can become almost acceptable. Now, that isn't my big point here other than to say verify because you want to make sure that whatever you give to actually matters. And there are a lot of organizations doing great things. And I believe one of the best investments is right here at Orchard Hill.

But here's the second thing, and that is to be generous because it's prudent. And these are from the verses that you heard read, he says, "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously." And sometimes in a church like Orchard Hill, where we are not part of what some people have called the name it, claim it kind of movement, we shy away from verses like this.

But do you see what this actually says? You see, there's a danger sometimes that you can say well, I don't want to adopt a theology that I'm not certain is right. And I would say that's not right to say I can give God \$100, and he's going to give me back a bunch of money. Maybe you've seen people on TV kind of promoting that kind of thing. That is not biblical. But it's also not biblical to not understand that the Bible teaches this very simple principle, and that is, if you're stingy, then stingy is what you can expect. And if you're generous, generosity is what you can expect. And what that means is that the prudent thing to do is to say, how can I be generous with my time?

In fact, if there were a financial adviser who would sit with you and say you have a complete guarantee that what you invest here will not only be saved but will earn the best return you can possibly get, it would be foolish not to put money into that investment now. No financial adviser can give you that kind of insight because the market is unpredictable. They can make predictions and be really good, but they can't say if you're generous, you will be given back generously. And where the flaw sometimes comes in is when we say I'll be generous so God will give me even more.

But notice why this generosity exists. He says, "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." So, what God does is He gives to generous people so that they can abound even more in generosity.

Some of you might be here and you might be early in life saying look, I don't have a lot to give. Maybe you're a student and you say you know, what difference does it make if I give something? The difference it makes is in your life because there's a principle that starts to happen. And that is the more you're faithful to what God gives you, the more he entrusts to you. Therefore, starting even with a little bit and just saying God, I surrender to you, what is rightfully yours, is a way in which you start the process of being faithful to God, even with very little.

In fact, in Luke chapter 16, verse ten, Jesus said this. He says, "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much." You may read that and think that's about the idea of dishonesty. And there's a part of that but notice it's about trusting, and whoever is trustworthy with a little will be trustworthy with much. And so, to just simply say I will give a portion of what God gives me to God is a way of prudently trusting in the generosity of God.

But one of the things we need to do is overcome what sometimes is a scarcity kind of mindset that says there isn't enough. Because when we're beholden to scarcity in our thinking, we will become anxious, fearful, and stingy in what we do, rather than saying, how do I give generously? And here's what I know from years of being around people who set out to say I will give regularly, systematically a percentage, the first percentage of what God entrusts to me, rarely go back and stop doing it because they see how God blesses them. They usually say this is one of the things that I will never stop doing, giving the first portion of what God gives me to the work of God. And so, it's prudent to be generous.

But there's something else here and that is we can be generous because it's fun. Now, you may say fun. What do you mean? Well, look at this. Verse seven again. "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." And the idea here is God loves when people celebrate the opportunity you give. And so cheerful here in the original language is a word that means hilarious, funny, and joyful. And so, he's saying God loves it when people celebrate it.

I have a friend who pastors a church, and one of the things that they do is whenever they say it's time for the offering, the whole congregation cheers because they're trying to say it's a time for cheerful giving. Now, I think that's a little weird and would weird out some new people, but I also love the idea of saying it's offering time, let's go! Because there is something about that mindset that says I'm understanding that what I spend on me is different than what I invest in, something that's better.

Now, I've heard people talk about this idea of God loves a cheerful giver, and they'll say things like God loves a cheerful giver, but he'll take it from a grump. Now, I don't think that actually captures what's going on here because it isn't that God wants your money, but He wants your heart, your alignment to go toward what it is that you love and value most, is what God loves and values most. And so, the idea is not I may or may not be cheerful or I can't give because I'm not cheerful, it's let my heart lead the way.

In fact, when I first started as a pastor, I didn't like talking about money because it felt uncomfortable. But here's what I've learned in years of being around church. In fact, when I first came to Orchard Hill, the year-end giving thing was like, man, every year I've got to talk about money. And it's like well, yeah, that's what we do here at Orchard Hill. I probably have been here long enough that I could try to help change that structure. But here's why I still like to do it, because money represents your highest allegiance. Money represents what you love, and therefore, to not address money is to avoid one of our biggest areas of discipleship, one of our biggest areas of idolatry, and one of our biggest areas of worship. And what loving or making it fun is about is saying what I love more than the that new thing I was going to buy or that experience that I can have, is seeing God work in and through what I do with the resources that God's entrusted to me.

Maybe here's a way to think about this. This is going to date me a little bit so if you're younger than me, you may not have had this experience in school, but if you're kind of my age or maybe somewhere in the ballpark, you may remember this. What I'm thinking about is when I was in grade school, we used to have these Valentine's Day parties. I think this has gone totally out of fashion and probably for good reason, but Valentine's Day parties were the kinds of things where you had to come and bring a Valentine for everybody. Everybody had a box, and you had to stuff one in every box so that nobody had a box with like two valentines. So again, some of you are like schools used to do that and make you do it. Yes, it was an oppressive era. And I remember going to school with these valentines and stuffing them in all the boxes and just thinking this is ridiculous.

And so, me and a couple of my friends decided that we should make this more interesting. Now, I'm not saying that I was a good kid, and here's part of how we made it more interesting. What we did was we decided that we would have some extra Valentines and we would put them in different boxes. We would write one to maybe one of our other buddies,

and it would be from a secret admirer telling him how cute he was and how, you know, they were hopeful. And then he'd be like, I got a secret admirer. We're like yes, you do. And then we have some that probably weren't as nice, or it's like, oh yeah, I won't even tell you. It was just a swear word. That was how we did it.

Now, the reason I say this is, that was grudgingly. There was nothing in that that I wanted to be a part of. So, I turned it into a mockery. Do you know what became joyful? Well, a few years later, I started to date in high school and found somebody that I thought I kind of liked, trying to figure out what she wanted and how to make her happy with something. And now, as a man who's married and loves my wife, trying to find ways to make her happy. See the difference? God loves a cheerful giver because it means that your heart has come toward him.

And then we, I think, can be generous because it brings alignment. I mentioned this idea of the way that we use our money shows something about our heart. But Jesus says something in Matthew 6:21. He says where your heart is, there your treasure will be also. Actually, that isn't what he says. Is it? Do you know what he actually says? See, I say that and it sounds normal. You know, your heart and your treasure. Your treasure follows your heart. What does he say? He says where your treasure is, is where your heart will be. And the reason that order is important is because what we treasure, our heart will follow. What we give to produces alignment. How we spend our time produces alignment.

Here's how he says this in Second Corinthians nine, verse ten. "Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness." Now, what's a harvest of righteousness? Righteousness is our standing with God. It's a right relationship to God. How is this tied to giving, which he's just been talking about? Do you know how it's tied to giving? Your issues with what you do with resources produce alignment in your life. So, when you say God, I'm giving, what happens is a harvest of righteousness begins to also take root in you, not just a harvest of abundance. And so, you have an opportunity to produce alignment.

And then here's what he says in verse 12 and following. "This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else." So, he says this very simple thing, and that is that the way that you give produces something greater in you, your heart will follow your treasure.

I don't know if you've ever gotten a car that was new to you, that was nicer than your old car. But if you've ever done this, you know a little bit about how this works because your old car, you know, you hit a point where it's like there's French fries and stuff all over the place. And, you know, you don't mind if it gets nicked somewhere because it's kind of hitting that spot. Some of you are like, I've never driven a car like that. And then you get a car that's new to you and you pull into the parking lot, and you pull away from all the other cars to park so no one opens the door and hits your car. All of a sudden, you're treasuring that whole thing differently because your alignment is following your treasure. And what this is teaching very simply is that your generosity will produce in you something that is important.

I mentioned some of you may be here saying, you know, my little bit isn't going to move the needle. You know, I see a goal and it's this big number, and if I can give \$20, how can that help? What can I tell you? It makes a difference in you and in the spiritual temperature of the church because there's alignment, mission, and compassion for what God is doing. That makes a difference.

And so, we have some great strategic opportunities in front of us in 2024 as a church. Certainly, the addition of the kid's NextGen Wing is an important thing. We don't know what the next decade will bring. But again, just the sheer numbers of the past would lead us to believe that the opportunity of that space is immense. Certainly, the giving that you've done over recent years has allowed us to multiply campuses, and there are some exciting opportunities in the coming year that I'm excited to tell you about. But those are opportunities that again, we can be a part of. Certainly, this year we said that part of what we'll do is take some of what's given and give it to our ministry partner in Haiti to build a ministry complex that will help to train pastors to pastors in rural villages in one of the poorest places in our hemisphere. In other words, there are just incredible opportunities. And what we simply say every year at the end of the year is, if you would just pray about and do what God leads you to do.

As Russ mentioned earlier, there are cards at the info desk. You can also do it online and just simply say here's what we can do. And it's a way to say we participate in the mission. And as I said earlier if you're saying Orchard Hill isn't my church, I'm not even sure about Jesus, pick something and be generous. But don't let, maybe just whatever your lack of connection is, keep you from being generous.

And let me just add this and say this. Last night, you know, sometimes I pray God to prompt me in the moment. I'm feeling that in this moment here. So, it's a little bit of a risk. It's off-script. I believe ultimately, if you're a Christian, if you name yourself as a Christ follower, and you're not committed to a local church, that is ultimately sinful. And if you're not committed to a local church by giving, that is equally sinful. And if it isn't this church, that's not a problem for me. Sure, I want everyone to come here. I think it's a great place with awesome ministry but go somewhere else and give if you don't think you can give here. But to sit and not give if you're a follower of Jesus is an unbiblical picture of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Now I realize you're saying wow, that's not very Christmasy. But notice what this text does. At the end of the passage, he says this in verse 15. "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" And just before this, he said that the obedience that accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ. What's the gospel? It's the good news that Jesus came and has won a victory for those of us who cannot win the victory. You see, the generous spirit is something that God has given to people, to you, to me. It's available to all people. This is the message of Christmas. His indescribable gift is that those of us who don't deserve, who haven't earned, are considered part of God's family and share part of the eternal inheritance that God has promised through Jesus Christ. And when that moves you and that moves me, that's when our hearts start to say, you know, that purchase, that thing that I'm going to think I do that's going to bring me joy. I know that the greater joy is rooted in something that has eternal significance.

Now, I know, and you know that having more resources makes life easier. It's not like we're blind to that. But what you also know is that anything that you buy, anything that you do, does not produce ultimate happiness. The harvest of righteousness is something that transcends what you can do, the security you can get, the things that money buys for you. And so, generosity is a path to greater fulfillment. And we look up and see what God has done in Jesus. And that is where that's rooted.

Father, we pray today that your generosity would not be lost on us, but that we would see and savor what this season is all about. God, I pray that you would let our worship, our sense of being, given and lavished, a gift that we cannot earn, that it would motivate in us something generous in our own spirit. And we pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.