

Recent events reminded me of J.B. Phillips' picture of our culture with a rewriting of the Beatitudes:

Happy are the 'pushers'
for they get on in the world.
Happy are the 'hard boiled'
for they never let life hurt them.
Happy are they who complain
for they always get their own way in the end.
Happy are the blasé
for they never worry about their sins.
Happy are the slave drivers
for they get results.
Happy are the street-smart
for they know their way around.
Happy are the troublemakers
for they make people take notice of them.

If Paul was reading that as he wrote his letter, he would say, 'You Corinthian Christians, that's what I'm talking about.'

Look at what's happening to you: You're a picture of selfishness, of looking at what's in it for me, of being served rather than being a servant of Jesus Christ, of forming groups that make demands for having everything go according to their particular desires.

That's the source of troubles in the Corinthian church – the source of unhappiness – the root problem of their difficulties – AND Paul wants that picture to change!

He says that when non-Christians in Corinth look at you, that's the picture they have of Jesus Christ, and it's not a good picture!

So he holds up a picture of the little church in Macedonia - this is a picture of a church that reflects the generous spirit of God's love in Jesus Christ.

He's telling them to hang the picture on the bulletin board in the fellowship hall, and if they look at it, this is what they see...

For one thing, they see a lot of joyful people. It's a joyful picture!

Listen again to the tagline Paul puts on this picture of living generosity: *"Their abundant joy and extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part."*

Abundant joy and a wealth of generosity... we know, don't we, how much the attitude of the giver has to do with the value of the gift.

A father told of a time, a rainy Saturday afternoon, as he was watching his football games on TV, his wife asked him to take their two little boys to the movies. He mumbled and grumbled a reluctant 'yes.'

On the way home, he asked them if they enjoyed the movie. One of them said, "No, not really." "Why not?" "Because we knew you really didn't want to go."

We make the choice about our attitude in giving, and it affects the value of the gift.

A few paragraphs down from our passage, Paul says it this way: *"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."*

Now let me say this, this joyful generosity is not like what one minister told me. He said he had a most generous church; that he didn't even have to ask, he had members who were always happy and willing to give him a piece of their mind!

No, that's not the picture of generosity Paul is sharing with the Corinthians. God loves a cheerful giver because, as Paul says, God is the one who gives us every blessing that we have, and God gives abundantly - for this reason - God looks for us to share abundantly in every good work.

And so it is in this picture of generosity of the Macedonian church: they shared abundantly in this good work for the Jerusalem church

As Paul says, "They gave beyond their means, out of their poverty, more than we could have hoped for."

Generosity is always a reflection of your potential for giving, and then some!

Look at the widow in our Gospel story - she maximized her potential for giving. The rich were giving out of their surplus, from their leftovers, and to be honest, were giving much more than the widow.

Note this, though, this story is the last scene in Jesus' public ministry in the gospel of Mark. The power of the widow's offering is that without reservation she gave her whole living to God, a foreshadowing of the giving that Jesus is about to make.

Jesus calls our attention to her gift, a picture of generosity, as a prelude to his own generous gift for our sake.

The rich people put in large sums, yes; but it was the leftovers, and this poor widow gave the fullness of all she had - Paul holds up the picture of the Macedonian church as they are doing exactly what the widow did, and says that's what generosity looks like, that's what the love of God in Christ Jesus looks like!

As someone said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give."

What does it take for you and me to be generous for the sake of God who has given us everything, and most of all, has given us all his love in his only son, Jesus Christ?

As Ralph Seeger wrote:

God has given us -

*more skies than you can see;
more sun than you can bear to watch;
more stars than you can number;
more breath than you can breathe;
more field than you can sow;
more grace than you can comprehend;
more love than you can know.*

More than - that's the picture of generosity that we see in the widow, that the Macedonian church copied.

A missionary was witnessing to the chief of a primitive tribe. The chief was trying to impress the missionary with gifts that were of great value in his culture: pigs and potatoes and jewelry.

The missionary said to the chief, "My God does not want the chief's pigs or potatoes or jewelry. My God wants the Chief himself."

The Chief smiled and replied, "You have a very wise God, for when I give your God myself, he also gets my pigs and potatoes and jewelry."

Just as Frances Havergal wrote in that beautiful hymn:

*Take my love, my Lord, I pour;
At thy feet, its treasure's store.
Take myself, I will be
Ever only, all for thee.*

Ever only, all for thee – a picture of generosity.

Robert Fulghum is known for his bestseller, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.

The story is that alongside the mirror in his bathroom was a picture of a lady that was not his wife.

Every morning when he shaved, he would glance at her; a picture of a small, humped-over woman wearing sandals, a white robe and headdress with a blue stripe around it; surrounded by important-looking people in tuxedos, evening gowns and the regalia of royalty.

It was a picture of Mother Teresa receiving her Nobel Peace Prize.

Fulghum kept that picture there to remind him every morning that he needed to be more like her if he wanted to truly make a positive difference in the world.

Would anyone put your picture on their mirror as a model of what generosity looks like?

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.