



Gospel Community

Sample

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Unit 7. A Generous Community

(Romans 12:13)

Introduction

Reflection

When was the last time you were truly disgusted with something or someone? What did that experience reveal about your own heart?

In order to help us appreciate the full significance of this gospel virtue, and in line with Paul's own method, we will briefly revisit the first 3 chapters of Romans. From 1:18 through to 3:20, Paul demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt the need for the gospel. It is in 3:10-18, at the end of this vital section, that he takes a virtual sledgehammer to any remaining delusions of virtue:

10 as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

11 no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."

13 "Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

14 "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

17 and the way of peace they have not known."

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

There it is, pure and simple and in black and white: There is no one righteous, no not even one! The picture Paul paints is as bleak as bleak can be. There are no chinks of light to relieve the blackness, no escape holes any of us can scurry through. Yet, just when all the wind has been knocked out of our sails, and the entire human race is suffocating under the weight of guilt, verse 21 bursts onto the scene with power, vigour and glorious clarity. At the point of our greatest need, *God intervened*. Where we are most vulnerable, *God has stepped in*. Where we are most vile, *God has identified with us*. When we were most guilty, *God took our place*. When we were most helpless, *God rescued us*. He has given us a righteousness when we had none. He has met all the demands of his law, satisfied all the claims of his justice, and placated his legitimate and measured anger against our sin. We were paupers and he gave us riches beyond our dreams. We were hungry and he prepared a banquet to satisfy our deepest longing. We were thirsty and he poured out a river to quench our insatiable desire. When we were his enemies and without friends or

allies, he gave us his Son. Who did all this? God! Not us. In terms of our salvation, we did not contribute *one action, one intent, one desire, one request, one benefit*, for the simple reason that we had nothing, absolutely nothing, to contribute. Such is the nature and capacity of God's kindness. This is the gospel. We know how Paul has rehearsed it throughout Romans so far. God has made us right with him, reconciling us to himself. He moved us out of Adam and into Christ. Where we were once dead in sin, we are now dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. We have become slaves to righteousness, released from the law and belonging to Christ. The Holy Spirit of God himself dwells in us, making us heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ Jesus. We are eternally grafted into God's people and are destined for glory.

When all of these glorious realities are taken together it makes 12:13 seem so ordinary, predictable and almost tame. In view of God's mercies, of course we will contribute to the needs of the saints. Of course we'll practise hospitality. In the light of everything we've learned about the gospel from chapters 1-11, how can we do anything else? Why would we *want* to do anything else? In fact, we can go so far as to say that generosity is one of the key markers that we have got the gospel. Or, more accurately, that the gospel has got us. Being generous doesn't earn you God's smile, but it is the primary evidence that we're basking in his favour and delight.

The grace of God that comes to us in Christ is not something passive or inactive. It is creative. As the hot sun warms simply by being the sun and doing what the sun does, so God's grace, which is his generosity in action, warms our heart simply because that's what grace does. It recreates itself. The gospel is God's prodigious generosity in action, which like his word in Genesis 1 forms that of which it speaks.

Reflection

Romans 12:13 finds itself nestled in a section surrounded by and infused with generosity. Take a moment to reflect on the gospel response to these situations:

- Bless those who persecute you (v.14): Push-back generosity
- Weep with those who weep (v.15): Empathetic generosity
- Associate with the lowly (v.16): Radical generosity
- Repay no one evil for evil (v.17): Surprising generosity
- Never avenge (v.19): Patient generosity
- Overcome evil with good (v.21): Triumphant generosity

Generosity is everywhere in this final section of Romans. Look at chapter 14 and its emphasis on welcoming others. That is generosity. Not passing judgement on one another in 14:13 is another expression of generosity. Notice 15:2, with the repeated emphasis on welcome. And 15:7 sums it up: "Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." These actions and attitudes are only possible when our hearts have been gripped and transformed by God's prodigious generosity in Christ. But once that has happened, then they are inevitable. It is in this frame of mind, now that the tone and the context have been set, that we can properly comprehend and experience the full force of what Paul is saying in 12:13.

Below we will uncover two simple and concise descriptions of a community formed *by* the gospel and existing *for* the gospel. They are distinct but closely connected, with the second being a necessary consequence of the first.

1. Share with the Lord's people who are in need

Love and generosity, unity and joy, assurance and boldness, a spirit of praise and prayer, and a passion to reach out to win others, are recurring marks of gospel communities, but the key word in this sentence is the word '*share*'. It is a familiar word: *koinonia*. The same root word is used in Acts 2:44: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common." It's there again in 4:32: "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common." The sharing of which Paul writes is not in which someone has an abundance and gives a portion to someone else. It is more of an attitude that sees the abundance as not belonging to *me* so much as it belongs to *us*. But that does not mean I relinquish ownership, because that would be to relinquish responsibility. It is to say to one another, "We have these resources, how can the benefit be maximised?"

Romans 12:13 calls us to generosity that is:

1. Sacrificial (Common)
2. Specific (Saints)
3. Strategic (Need)

Generosity is not reckless, careless abandon. Dropping large currency notes out of a window onto passers-by on the street below isn't generous; it's stupid and negligent. Generosity is using what you have and *all* you have to the best effect. And one way in which this happens is shown in the second clause in 12:13.

2. Practise hospitality

Leon Morris cites F.J. Leenhardt in his comment on this phrase: "Christian hospitality must inconvenience us more than that of others; we do not choose our time or our guests." Morris then goes on to say, "Paul is not advocating a pleasant social exercise among friends, but the use of one's home to help even people we do not know, if that will advance God's cause."⁶ We think we are being hospitable when we invite people we like around for a meal. As pleasant and enjoyable as this is, this is not what should characterise a generous community, formed by the gospel and existing for the gospel. The word translated '*pursue*' is a verb, a doing word, and it implies vigorous effort. Paul's saying: Don't be a passive responder to need. Go out of your way to open your home to others; others you don't necessarily click with; others who won't be able to repay you.

The word *hospitality* is made up of two words in the original language and means '*love of strangers*'. It would be helpful for each of us to look back over our diaries for the last six months, and take notice of how many strangers we have provided for in our home. This does not mean we should avoid having friends round. Nor does it mean we have no responsibility to care for those in our gospel communities. But it does mean that these should not be the only ones we care for. If our hearts are captured by the gospel and full of

⁶ Morris, L. *The Epistle to the Romans* (Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 448

Christ, there will be an indiscriminate nature to our generosity. It will be an instinct and a reflex, not a strategy. There is an unremitting clarity in Jesus' words in Luke 6:27-36:

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

The five key areas of generosity

As individuals and gospel communities, we should be characterised by generosity: eager, enthusiastic, irrepressible, extravagant generosity. Why? Because gospel communities are formed by the gospel and they exist for the gospel. And the gospel is about God's prodigious generosity. Our vertical response to the gospel is thankfulness. Our horizontal response to the gospel is generosity. We will be generous with our time, affection, money, home and resources.

Time

The gospel tells the story of a God who has all the time in the world for his world. He was prepared to 'invest' millennia in preparing the ground for the incarnation, where he spent decades living the life we couldn't live so that he could die the death we should die.

Yet, people who cannot use the term 'poverty' to describe their economic status, have started to employ it in their pressured and busy lives. People who are economically rich are often, or at least see themselves as being, time poor. In this world-view, time is a diminishing commodity requiring us to guard it jealously. We guard our down-time, family-time, holiday-time and me-time. This means that time for others is relatively scarce, and our culture legitimises our feelings of resentment when others encroach on those priority-time projects.

But the Lord seems to view time differently, principally because his time-focused activity is set within the context of eternity. With new hearts, re-orientated around eternity by the Spirit through the gospel, we can do the same. Christ liberates us from the limiting constraints of time-locked justification to enjoy a life of radical generosity. Investing in eternity means we do not need to be desperate to capitalise every moment.

Affection

You do not need be able to translate the Latin phrase *quid pro quo* (this for that) to buy into it as a relational strategy. We might recognise it more readily as “you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours”. It is easy to like some people. It is definitely easier to like people who are like us. Even more so if they like us. Jesus himself recognises the universality of this relational trait, cf. Luke 6:32-34.

This is not ‘good news’ for any of us. Working on principles of ‘give to get back’ and ‘only give if given to’ not only undermine relationships but also erode our relational capacity. The gospel calls us to unrequited affection for others, i.e. to love those who do not love us in return. It is in this way that we display the family likeness; we show the world who our Father is and what he is like. We model the gospel that tells us of a God who loved us when we were both unlovely and unlovable. Look at the way Paul exults in the truth that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8) and that God reconciled us to himself “while we were enemies” (Rom 5:10).

As these truths capture our affections we will respond in kind. Not out of any sense of trying to earn or repay God’s prodigious affection, but out of an instinctive, almost impulsive response to it.

Money

Money is far more than a mere medium of exchange. It is, amongst other things, a means of identity and security: it makes a statement and secures the future. Which goes some way towards explaining why so many of us find it difficult to be generous with it. If I give it away, then I have less, and less money threatens both my identity and my security.

But the gospel frees me from such silly nonsense. The amount of money I have is irrelevant in terms of who I am because my identity is found only in Christ. I can be wealthy or poor, because in Christ I am everything I am meant to be, and have everything I need to have. The gospel also assures me that my Saviour has secured my future. I don’t need to hoard money for a rainy day because I am sheltered under his wing.

Understanding and relishing these truths opens up endless possibilities for generosity. I can live as a steward, and be the means by which my generous heavenly Father provides for and blesses others.

Home

Home is an evocative term. Even if our experience is otherwise, the idea of home conveys images of warmth, welcome and acceptance. Which is perhaps why so many people guard it jealously. Experience teaches that it is not only Englishmen who view their home as their castle. For many of us, home is a Jesus-substitute. The gospel tells us that he is our refuge, yet we view our home in that way. It’s a place of escape from the world, somewhere to kick off our shoes and recharge our batteries.

Jesus makes a wonderful and liberating invitation when he says: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). As I find my rest in him, I don’t need to hide behind closed doors. My home is then open to being a place of

blessing for others. Somewhere people can come to experience the warmth of welcoming grace and unconditional acceptance.

Resources

This is a general, catch-all term being used as a mopping-up strategy. Anything, absolutely anything not covered by the four categories mentioned so far is included in this!

The connecting theme in each of these areas is stewardship. If I allow my inclination and cultural context to shape me, I will think in terms of ownership. If I am the owner then the right of decision or power of veto is mine. I can do whatever I want with whatever is mine. But if I am shaped by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, then everything I am and have is his. He has given me the privilege of managing it all for him, and he wants others to see what a kind and generous King he is through his kind and generous people.

Reflection

Consider each of the 5 key areas of generosity. Which ones are you good at? In which ones could you improve? Try and do the exercise with some Christian friends.

Conclusion

So, to what extent has the gospel got my heart? Jesus nails it down to the stark practicalities. Be generous as your Heavenly Father is generous. The challenge before us as believers, individually and corporately, is to show the world who our Father is by displaying our family likeness.

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