

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Generosity

Presented by Michael Jensen

#### I

In 1990 scientist Richard Dawkins wrote a book called *The Selfish Gene*. His book was about genes and evolution - but I think the title is catchy for another reason: it pretty much sums up how deeply embedded in the human soul stinginess is. Self-interest is the only kind of interest we pay. Greed springs eternal in the human breast. There is a meanness within. Generosity is profoundly unnatural...

The genius of capitalism is that of course it understands this. Whenever communism has been tried - the idea being that you had to share everything with everybody - it has never worked. We humans much prefer the possibility of having more than others. And we hate to think of people getting things when they haven't earned them. Make the dole bludgers work, we say.

Australia can be a very ungenerous place. We hate to think of sharing Australia too widely with others, unless they pay for it of course. We don't want people to think they can get something for nothing, do we?

#### II

We love the hipness of having. Owning stuff is the essence of cool. And giving away our cash might enforce a coolness downgrade. A compromise of style is never worth it, is it? We are great at the want to need transfer, in our minds. I want a mobile phone -> I need a mobile phone. It's much easier to justify spending on needs rather than being generous. And advertising convinces us that selfishness is right, because the most important person in the world IS you.

And when we give, we attach lengths of string to our gifts so those to whom we give become our debtors. Absurd games in families - who can give the biggest gift! The giving of the gift buys you power over the one who accepts it...

Corporate sponsorship - which is advertising pretending to be generosity-> the classic example of giving with strings. Or even the way charities sell themselves - they realise we need a red nose or a pink ribbon, or a teddy bear or a shaved head or whatever it is so that everyone will know how generous we are! They know that if we weren't allowed to show-off our generosity, then we probably wouldn't BE generous in the first place.

What we don't understand is that true generosity doesn't expect returns. It isn't about deserving. It's about freely giving. Mostly what we do isn't giving - it's investing.

Why do we people find it so hard to be generous? Probably because we find our security and meaning and purpose in things, and we find it scary to give away the things that we depend on. We are concerned that we will be diminished by our giving. We are worried that if we give, there will not be enough left for ourselves. We are concerned that the things we had to work for and own fair and square will be got by someone else for nothing!

Further, Jesus himself said that greed, like adultery, murder, malice, deceit, envy, slander and a lot else besides, has its origins in the dark human heart. Our meanness is deep-seated.

How then, can we learn to be generous?

We need first of all to study and understand the lavish generosity of God himself. He is the model of all generosity. We can never grasp true generosity until we get how generous he is.

### III

We should turn our attention first to creation itself as an example of God's generosity. The Israelites knew this and called him Jireh, the one who provides. The WAY he creates is so lavish and rich and abundant. Creation is full of things which exist to delight us: the sheer variety and colour of the animals, the taste buds on our tongues, coffee, sex, surf, the song of birds. So much of creation is so wonderfully **unnecessary**. He has garnished the world. A garnish - the bit of parsley or whatever on your plate that is there for no reason other than to make it look good.

If God had not been generous with the world, the only animals would have been rats, pigeons and cockroaches; the only food would have been tofu, and we wouldn't have had two genders. The amazing thing about the creation story is that God didn't have to do it at all - yet he made it and then us so he could share it with us. It was an act of sheer generosity. Psalm 8 expresses this beautifully:

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? Yet you made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honour...”

It is an amazing world - and amazingly, God has chosen US to rule over it.

But God is also incredibly generous in his mercy - by making possible our re-connection to him through the death of Jesus. Not when we had finally earned his favour. Not when we had deserved it - but just out of his generous heart.

Ephesians 2:3b - 9:

*Like the rest we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgression - it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast.*

Yes, God is rich in mercy. He is full of mercy. This richness is a dark chocolate rich. He is awash with mercy... and he gives it to us for free! By grace - that great word **grace** tells us that we did nothing to earn God's gift of being made alive in Jesus.

### IV

So - how can we be generous? If we are going to be generous it will be God's Holy Spirit at work in us. We need to ask God's help to melt our naturally mean hearts. We need to realise that generosity is not achievable without God's help.

Jesus outlined an important principle of generosity in Matthew 6:1-4: ‘..when you give to the needy do not announce it with trumpets as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets to be honoured by human beings. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. This is the opposite of the corporate sponsorship, or the red-nose day, isn't it? Giving in secret, or at least without putting an ad in the paper, is a great way to ensure that you are not giving with strings attached - that your giving is truly generous.

Give out of what you have. Generosity need not be restricted to the rich. Anyone can be generous out of what they already have. In fact, if you reckon that you have to wait until you a bit richer until you can be generous, then you probably will never be generous.

Remember the poor widow that Jesus saw in the temple giving the two small coins? Let her be our example.

Also - we can be generous with far more than just things. We can be generous with our time, or our hospitality, or our family, as well as our possessions. What we need to do is to ask what do I have that I can be generous with? Undoubtedly there will be things. Generosity which comes from the heart will be evident sharing of all sorts of things, regardless of your wealth.

Be generous to whom? There are so many opportunities for giving to charities and all that these days - how can we make the decision about who we should be generous too? Am I being stingy when I ignore the charity in the shopping mall, or when I turn the Salvos away? Generosity is something we can show to anyone at anytime - it's not just about giving money to organisations, it's about a whole attitude to life.

**BUT:**

The Bible says our first responsibilities are to other Christians who have less than we do. In particular Paul encourages the sharing of wealth among the Christian churches. I think this means that as a priority, we should be looking for Christians who are less fortunate than ourselves materially. We can give to organisations such as TEAR fund and to missionary societies that support churches in developing countries.

**V**

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9

Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously, will also reap generously. Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work....you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...

Generosity is actually smart because it trusts in the God who provides. We can trust in God to provide for our needs - and give freely and cheerfully. How liberating! We needn't be fearful or resentful when we are generous. Instead we can be cheerful and full of the expectation of God's blessing.

Jesus often spoke of people being distracted by earthly things and so losing focus of God's kingdom. Remember the parable of the Rich Fool? He built bigger barns to hoard up his earthly wealth, but then lost his life. Jesus encouraged his disciples, on the other hand, to store up treasure in heaven.