

Enriched
2 Cor. 9:6-11
Sept. 20, 2018
Kory Wilcoxson

Pastor John Ortberg tells the story of the time he and his wife went hot-air ballooning with friends of theirs. Although everyone was a little apprehensive, they decided to take on this new adventure together. Everything was going fine until the balloon got tangled up in some electrical wires several hundred feet off the ground. Ortberg and his friends began to panic as the balloon operator tried frantically to free them. Ortberg's friend turned to him and said, "You're a pastor, do something religious!" "So," Ortberg said, "I took up an offering."

It's funny but it's true, right? One of the ways the church is known in our culture today is as a place that just wants your money. When televangelists are taking donations for their new private jet and mega-church pastors live in swanky mansions, it's hard to get away from the stereotype that the church is all about the dollars and will use any means to get them. "Call now to give your love offering to help us build our Shine Jesus Shine drive-through car wash and pray and spray station." It's easy to believe that the church is most concerned about getting rich.

But on this Sunday, as we start our annual stewardship campaign, I want to shift our thinking from getting rich to being enriched. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9 that we are "enriched in every way" by God, meaning that God has blessed us with everything we need. But God has done that for a specific purpose.

There's a certain place I like to eat in town, and you'll be shocked to know it's not a BBQ place. I go to this restaurant because of a certain salad. Now before you accuse me of vegging out, you have to understand why I like this salad. It's called a BLT Chef Salad, and it only has four ingredients: a bed of lettuce, a heaping of mozzarella cheese, a ton of diced tomatoes, and then, piled on top, is a huge mound of bacon. Like, a whole pig's worth of bacon. I like ordering it because when my wife asks me what I had for lunch, I can truthfully tell her I had a salad; what she doesn't know is that it was really just a mountain of bacon with some other stuff around it.

I was eating at this restaurant the other day with a very good friend when the waiter brought me my BLT Chef Salad, set it down in front of me, and asked, "Is there anything else you need?" And I looked around me, at this huge salad, at the full glass of sweet iced tea, at my good friend sitting across from me, at my nice clothes, at my car parked outside the window that takes me from my loving family to my great job and back each day. "Is there anything else you need?" No, no thanks, I've got all I need.

Did you ever think that when you were at this stage in your life you would have all the blessings that surround you? Your parents, your children, your grandchildren, your home, your job, your cars, your friends, your hobbies, your church. Who could have imagined? I'm sure there are times when you dream about having more – bigger house, nicer car, more zeroes in the paycheck. That's only human, and we all do that from time to time. But when we stop and look at our lives, do we have all we need?

Paul encourages the Corinthians not to forget the source of their blessings when he says, “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.” We have spent our lives working hard and sowing seeds that are now bearing fruit: seeds of love that have blossomed into our families; seeds of education and training that have led to our jobs and responsibilities; seeds of wealth and prosperity that have grown into all the wonderful things we enjoy around us. We’ve spent a lifetime working to get where we are, and now we are enjoying blessings beyond compare. Do we have all we need?

Paul knew the Corinthians had all they needed, and that they had a need to share it. Paul is in the process of collecting an offering to take back to the church in Jerusalem to show them that the churches he has started are living out the gospel by being generous in their giving. Paul tells the Corinthians that he is sending some folks to collect their portion of the offering and he expects the Corinthians to demonstrate their generosity. So, this is Paul’s stewardship campaign cover letter.

In it, he reminds his readers that they have been blessed for a purpose. He writes, “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” In other words, God has given you all you need, you have all you need, so now make sure others have what they need. We express our thanks to God through our generosity.

Notice here that Paul doesn’t mention an amount. He doesn’t say, “A gift of \$10 is the silver generosity level and comes with a cute angel lapel pen, but a gift of \$100 gets you the gold generosity level, complete with a ‘God Loves Me’ sweatshirt.” Paul doesn’t set a minimum or maximum to define generosity. Paul knew that our attitude when we give is more important than the amount. God is not concerned about how much we give; God is concerned about how we give. “Give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or out of compulsion, because God loves a cheerful giver.” God doesn’t love a rich giver or a poor giver; God loves a cheerful giver.

Is it possible to be a cheerless giver? Sure! We can give begrudgingly, we can give because we feel we have to. And just to be clear, the church won’t turn away a cheerless gift. But your decision to give isn’t between you and the church. It’s between you and God. Too often a cheerful giver is cheerful because he got away with giving as little as possible! But what if God took the same approach with us, giving us as little as possible? Looking at our own lives is proof that God is by nature a giving being, and one of the ways we reflect God’s image in us is when we are giving. Giving is in our nature – it feels good to give, doesn’t it? – but we have been conditioned to believe that what we have is ours because we earned it, which doesn’t leave much room for God’s generosity.

If we do what our culture tells us to do, we focus on what we’ve done to get where we are, how we are the main reason for our success, and we become more concerned about holding onto what we have. But if we focus on what God has done to help us get where we are – people who have been brought into our lives, doors that have been opened – then we are more likely to think more generously.

It’s through our generosity that God is made known to others. Paul says, “You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving

to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” There’s a ripple effect to our giving. When we give and others are blessed by it, they in turn praise God. The more we give, the more God is praised. When we give to God this way, we are sending a message to our world that we aren’t buying into the consumerism and consumption that is so rampant around us. Rather than focus on becoming rich, we seek to enrich others the way we have been enriched.

I read this fascinating story the other day about the metamorphosis of a caterpillar. At a certain stage in its life cycle, a caterpillar becomes a voracious, over-consumptive glutton, consuming everything in sight. It’s not concerned about whether or not the praying mantis or the cricket gets its food; the caterpillar simply eats and eats and eats. The more it consumes, the fatter and more sluggish it gets. Are there any comparisons there to our culture? I’m not thinking of any specific individuals, but how our culture as a whole encourages us to eat and drink and buy and take, regardless of the needs of those around us.

When a caterpillar does this, something amazing happens. At the moment when the caterpillar is at its most gluttonous, inside of it these things called imaginal cells begin to stir. Imaginal cells are specialized cells that, when they connect with each other, become the catalysts for the caterpillar’s metamorphosis. These cells feed off the caterpillar’s excess and begin the process that will turn the caterpillar from a gluttonous, self-serving creature into a beautiful butterfly.

We are called to be the imaginal cells in our world. We are called to counter the self-serving greed of our culture in order to bring about transformation and change. We have something beautiful to show the world, God’s creativity and abundance and love. And it’s through our generosity, the ways we take that which enriches us and use it to enrich others, that we not only express our gratitude to God, but we also begin to change this world.

I hope you’ll take heed of the Stewardship Campaign materials you’ll be receiving. In 2019, we are seeking to grow our staff in a way that will help us have a greater impact on our families and our community. We are hoping to enrich the lives of those around us and connect people with God and with each other. We are planning to be the imaginal cells that help transform our worldview from greed to gratitude. And each of us has a part to play in making that happen.

I close with these words from author Thomas Tewell: “The only motivation for giving is gratitude. We do not give in order to earn God’s love or in order to deserve God’s love. We do not give because God needs the money or because the church or other worthy organizations need the money. We give simply in response to God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ. There is no other motivation for giving.” Our God is a giving God and we have been the recipients of that generosity. May the way we reflect that generosity be one of the ways we say, “Thank you.”