

Generosity is infectious 2 Corinthians 9:12-15

Intro: So this morning we are continuing our series on generosity. This morning's title is Generosity is infectious. My immediate response when I looked at this title when I began to prepare a few weeks ago, was "Is it?" Has Matt given me a title that I can even agree with? You will be relieved to hear that in my husband's absence I won't be disagreeing with him – or leading you astray! I think after a bit of deliberation I can agree with it.

But before I start delving deeper into this subject I just want you to turn to your neighbour as we are going to play a little word association game:

So, turn to your neighbour and tell them the first thing that comes into your mind when I say the word:

- Generous
- Savings Account
- Tithing
- Infectious

So when I said the word infectious what answers did we have? Please shout them out.... chicken pox, sickness, diarrhoea, cold....so this morning I feel like I am starting from way down here to convince you of the merits of Infectious Generosity, because infectious makes you think it is a bad thing not a good thing!

So to rectify the balance can anyone think of anything that is infectious that is neutral or maybe even good? Laughter, giggling, yawning, positive emotions for example happiness

If something is really good, as humans our natural response is to want to share it. I certainly recognise it in my own life – when I see a fabulous deal on the web I tell my friends, when Martin Lewis - money saving expert.com tells me I can get free Lego with a newspaper or a scarf from Moss Bros or when Easyjet launch their cheapest seats I tell people – hopefully people who might be interested! I want to spread the good news!

We are now going to have the first of our bible readings where we see God's generosity in action.

Readings 1 Kings 17:8-16

In this passage today: We learn of a widow with very few resources who is commanded by God to "supply Elijah with food." v9 Elijah first asks the woman for water which was within her ability to give, but he then asks her for bread. She answers honestly that she has no bread but only a little flour and oil. She tells him that she and her son are to eat these last scraps of food and then they were to die v12, from starvation, we imagine.

Elijah then makes a huge request v13 "Make me a little cake and with the leftovers make something for you and your son". I have to be honest and wonder what I might have said in the widow's situation. But Elijah encourages the widow "Don't be afraid" v13. Fear is often at the root of our disobedience isn't it? We doubt, we become fearful that we might be left without, that God's provision may not cover us and our needs – Elijah tells the widow the promise that the Lord was making to her that her flour and oil would not run out until the rains came and we assume the

famine ended. God's promise met perfectly the need of the widow for daily food. It reflects the perfect awareness of the Giver. Encouraged she shares what little she had with Elijah.

In this passage we witness God keeping his word, providing and releasing what this widow and her family needed. It was as they walked in obedience, as the widow trusted God's word each day that her faith was rewarded with literal food and sustenance.

I am sure she would never had chosen to have been in such need, but having God supply her needs daily in a miraculous way must have been a blessing that she could never have imagined. Just think the widow had a choice: she could have said NO to sharing with Elijah. She could have ignored God's command – I mean how often do we ignore God's prompts? She could have said I can't or won't share, out of fear, out of self preservation. In an attempt to hold tight to the little she had (which would have been very understandable) inadvertently she could have sealed her and her family's fate – starvation. But instead by giving away her little, God preserved her life and moreover blessed her.

The widow's obedience and generosity to Elijah unlocked God's generosity to her. I am sure she lived a very different life after walking with God in faith. We would hope too, I suspect, that as our lives are impacted by God's generosity so we too would strive to touch others with generosity. A bit like dropping a pebble into a pond – it creates ripples. 1 act of generous living, leads to another, to another and the circle of people blessed increases as they pass it on. I was reading about a church in Eastbourne who have created tokens and encouraged their church members to random acts of kindness in the community and to give the token as part of the gift, the receiver is encouraged thru the token to pass on an act of kindness to another – a ripple effect throughout Eastbourne.

I can certainly remember a time when this ripple effect touched my own life: after we had our first child, Amelie, our church created a rota and blessed us with hot dinners for 2 weeks which would arrive on the doorstep sometimes with a knock, sometimes just with a telephone message. They were amazing, such a gift when we had no energy to cook. So when the next family in our church had a baby I was first to sign up and in fact organised the rota for hot meals. I had been blessed and I wanted others to enter into the same blessing.

Can you think of a time when someone showed real kindness to you that you wanted to pass on to others..... (SHARE)

Some of us here might be hoping that generosity is a gene that we do or maybe don't have. If it's genetic we are just the way we are. But both from this passage in 1 Kings and from current scientific research I can tell you today that there is no gene for altruism or generosity. We are not told that the widow up until this point had been generous, it seems like she received the command from God and her behaviour modified. She became generous.

Most of us in life won't hear the Lord's voice commanding us to be generous, like this widow. But many of us might feel a nudge, that in certain situations we need to be generous, either with our words, time, resources. So can we learn to be generous? Yes, simply put, we can. We need to create opportunities for ourselves and others to be generous. I think there is certainly a grain of truth in the saying charity begins at home, helping family members and friends is easy, but as our

generosity muscles are flexed and we experience the joy of being generous, so it can flow over into our church family, our community, our work place. If we see generosity modelled around us, it can spread through example – the more people who make generous choices, the more it will spread! Generosity can be infectious.

Scientifically it is proven that to some extent the human brain is built, for altruism – doing kind things for no return. That makes sense doesn't it if we are made in the image of God that we bear some of his characteristics – one of them being generosity. God gave his only Son as a sacrifice, to bring us back to himself – there was nothing we could do to earn it, we couldn't give God back anything in return, it is all God's grace – His gift. So if God made our wiring, it was He who determined how we are made and knit together as Psalm 139 says, it should be no surprise that now as science begins to explain all sorts of things that we find out scientifically that God wired us so that we experience the same pleasure giving as we do receiving.

Hymn 2 – Take my life and let it be. We are going to remain seated to sing this next song. I am just going to give you a few moments to look over the words of this song before we sing – it is a prayer for surrender

Second reading: 2 Cor 9: 12-15

In this passage Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth that as their lives model generous living, not only will people be thankful to them for their generous gifts, but also God's name will be lifted up in thanksgiving. No wonder it has often been said that "**thanksgiving is thanks living.**"

Thanksgiving is thanks living. Thanksgiving is a style of life as well as a service of the lips.

As the world sees lives devoted to generous living and obedience to God's calling to generosity, it says in our passage that "men will praise God" v13.

Not only will people praise God as they see generosity at work, but generosity will lead to prayer. Others will pray for you because of the grace God has given you – subtle nuance – they don't pray for you because of your gracious service, they pray for you because of the grace GOD has given you. The passage reminds us that our generosity must always be rooted in God, or else it can become philanthropy, people praise you for your generosity and kindness, not to the ultimate giver of all good things.

The reading ends v15 with "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" or in some versions His "Unspeakable gift". If we had missed it before, this final verse reminds us that our ability to be generous is rooted in God's generosity to us. So are we aware of God's generosity? Are we thankful? Are our lives rooted in God? Because what I notice here is if we live in a poverty of spirit or poverty of grace – if we are holding God's gift at a distance, if we feel only partially blessed by God, if we don't acknowledge God's generosity in our own lives we will be limited in what we are able to pass on. And as Christians we are called to share, to be infectious with what we have, is it not better for us and those around us if we receive in its totality this indescribable gift, that we are then able to offer the fullness of the gift rather than a diminished gift?

Most scholars consider the indescribable gift in verse 15 to mean Jesus himself, God's gift to us, some however think it is the gift of generosity received through Christ. What is abundantly clear however is that it is a gift, not a reward or thing of merit.

But what is the proper response to God's indescribable/ unspeakable gift? Just as at Christmas in a few months, we will be offered gifts, will we receive them or refuse them? Will we be grateful for them or ungrateful? Will we tell others about them or just hide them away? But what about God, what about Jesus, what about the amazing gifts in Him. Will we receive Him? Will we thank Him? Will we tell others about Him, this indescribable gift?

To close, an encouragement for each of us here today is in that last verse, verse 15 "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift". Friendship with Jesus is pure gift and is open to all. Generosity is a gift that each of us can grow in. This morning the question is will we receive the indescribable gift of Jesus and will we choose to grow in his likeness in the gift of generosity. For the glory and praise of Him and Him alone.

Let's just take a moment and allow God to speak to us....

We will now sing 2 songs, the first reminds us that our lives need to be rooted in God and the second rejoices in the new life, the new patterns, the new gifts we can walk in as children of God. **Hymn 3 & 4** 652 Seek ye first and 322 I am a new creation (sing thru twice)

A Final prayer to close our service this morning: Father God we thank you that you have made us in your image. We pray this morning that by your Spirit, you would grow in us the gift of generosity. Help us to recognise your generosity in our lives and lead us to opportunities to be generous to others. Jesus you are the most excellent and indescribable gift – help us to lead lives and to find, albeit limited words that give you thanks and convey the joy, the privilege and the responsibility we carry as your disciples and children. Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live, to work and to witness to your praise and glory. Amen