

How to Be Poor – Living an Impoverished Life 2 Corinthians 9:6ff.

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How many of you have ever watched a program on TV dealing with how to get rich? How many of you have ever read a book or article about finances with tips on getting ahead or preparing for the future? Most of us have.

How many of you have read a book or heard a message on how to get poor? Some would say, *I don't need any advice on that; I am doing just fine on my own.* When we use the word "poor," we typically mean someone who doesn't have any money or assets. Real poverty is actually much worse than not having any money. You can live an impoverished life and still have lots of money. Jesus said that a man's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions.

Each year around this time I give a message or two on stewardship. It began a few years ago with a church-wide teaching focus entitled, *Buried Treasure*. God did some really great things through that series in many people's lives. We thank God for that. However, all truth is subject to amnesia. Especially, when it relates to stewardship and finances and how to honor God with what He gives us.

This may sound familiar to you. My brother and his family were here this past weekend. Part of our tradition now is that I take his three kids to the *Albanese Candy Factory*. Many of you have been there. We have some Albaneses in our church and so it's extra fun to go. The kids love it. So I told them they could all pick out one thing and I would buy it for them. Abby and Anna picked out some kind of sucker. Zac wanted a pound of candies, so he selected gummy bears and gummy worms and the like. I stood in the long line. I paid for the candy. I carried the candy out of the store. We're walking to the car and I decided to try one of the gummy bears. Zac saw me reaching in and guess what he said, "Uncle Steve, don't eat MY candy!" Did someone have to teach Zac to consider something given to him as "his candy?" No. It comes quite naturally to us all.

For a Christian, this is one of those categories that reveal whether our faith makes any difference in the practical areas of our lives. I'd say to our guests today, here at Bethel, we believe in practical Christianity. When saving faith is real, it shapes the way I live in the details of my life - How I love my family daily...what kind of employee or student I am...or what happens when I open my checkbook.

Of course, the Bible has much to say on the subject of finances and stewardship. We have studied many of the passages together. Our little series here is in 2 Corinthians 9:6ff. In chapters 8-9, Paul speaks very frankly with the Corinthians about an offering being collected for the saints in the Jerusalem church. In chapter 8 he talks about the Macedonian church and the gladness and generosity of their giving. What was so surprising about it was that Macedonia was the poorest of all areas. We might compare it to the Church of Sierra Leone, Africa which we have become familiar with here at Bethel. Paul says, the Sierra Leone Church gave generously, how about you Corinthians?

Corinth was rich. Corinth was a great city. Paul is challenging the Corinthian church to match the generosity of the poor Macedonian church. *The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*

Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:6-8) Today's message is....

How to Be Poor (How to Have an Impoverished Life Experience)

1. Sow/give sparingly (Verse 6)

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

If you want to get poor, don't give much of yourself or anything you have. Don't sow. Paul uses a farming illustration here, one that would have been very familiar in the culture of the day. Most people were involved in agriculture in some way. They had all put a seed into the ground and seen that very small seed produce a much larger harvest. Most farmers would agree, all things being equal, the more you plant the more you receive back. The less you plant, the less you receive. The illustration compares the giving to the Jerusalem offering to the planting of a seed. Generosity from the Corinthians would mean that they would receive back more from God. Stinginess in giving would receive little back from Him.

Galatians 6:7-8 uses the same illustration - *Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.*

The Galatians passage is using this principle in the ethical or moral realm. We can't mock God. We can't cut corners on Him or slip things past Him. He is God and has built into the moral world a principle that He abides by: whatever we sow, how we live our lives, determines what we receive from Him. Live for the flesh and you'll get what the flesh gives. Live for the Spirit and spiritual priorities and get the blessing that kind of life receives from God.

Here's another example from Luke 6:38 - *"Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."*

God has said in His word, *I am going to tell you the way it works. If you are stingy toward me, I'll be stingy toward you.* When my nephew was stingy toward me, did that make me want to run in and by him more? No. But I could. I'd like to. If he would have said, "Uncle Steve, have it all; I love you." I might run in and buy him twice that. God's the same way. So our first principle in how to get poor is that it's critical that you are stingy toward God. This principle applies across the board with all that God gives us - our spiritual gifts, our time, ministry opportunities, and yes, our money and possessions. Don't give up anything for God and He won't be generous. If God's not generous to you, then you are poor.

So if you are taking notes, let me give you some great ways to apply this. Avoid all opportunities to sacrifice for God. This will be hard at a good church because they will regularly give you opportunities to be generous to God's work. You'll have to work very hard at silencing the voice inside urging you to do something. But the longer you do it, the easier it gets.

I would also highly recommend never letting your children see you give money to God. Never let them see you going without something so you can give generously. Never let

them see you writing a check for a ministry purpose. By all means, don't encourage them to begin developing habits of giving. They might actually do it the rest of their lives.

Don't do what my parents did. I recall one football season, our local grocery store, Hy-vee, had a rub-off game card for Monday night football. If your card was the score of the game, you would win \$100. I remember one Tuesday morning, rushing to see the score of the game and joyfully discovering that we had won. For an elementary kid in the late 70s, \$100 was a fortune. I was thinking of all the things I could buy for \$100 because, after all, I had verified that we won. All of us kids were quite happy about the whole thing... until my parents announced that we would be giving the money to a project at church. *What? Why waste it like that?* I was very disappointed, but I learned a life lesson from my parents about what matters in life. If you want to be poor, don't do stuff like that and your kids will learn how to live selfishly. This will help your pursuit of poverty because selfish kids won't give of themselves to anyone, including you.

One big problem that I have no advice for you on is what to do about God in all this. He is very difficult to deceive. Galatians 6:7 says, *God is not mocked*. In other words, there are no pretenses with God. Our little rationalizations don't work with Him. I have no real advice. The only comfort I can offer is that the more you try to deceive Him, the more impoverished your life experience will be. Since this message is on how to be poor, sowing sparingly is a great way to get there.

2. Give reluctantly/joylessly (Verse 7)

Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Here we have another key. The text says, *God loves a cheerful giver*. The Greek word for *cheerful* is quite helpful, *hilarion*. We get our English word *hilarious* from it. If something is hilarious to us, our laughter is coming from deep down. It is sincere. It is heartfelt. It is joyous.

So now we are dealing with generosity on the level of motivation. What is my attitude in giving to God? Paul gives two keys to giving that will make you poor. The first is, **give reluctantly**. Some translations go with grudgingly or we might say, begrudgingly. Don't do it because you want to, do it because you have to. Try and view it like taxation or membership dues. I guarantee it will sap all the joy that giving would otherwise produce. Reluctant giving is always **joyless giving**.

A great example of reluctant giving is the story in Acts 5 of Ananias and Sapphira. This couple had sold a field. They were seeing others giving generously and they wanted to be seen as being generous, but they didn't want to give. They felt peer pressure to give or the desire to keep up an image. But they also loved money and didn't really want to give it. So what they did is they told the apostles this was the full price of the field, but they secretly kept some of it back. *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."* *When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.* (Acts 5:3-5)

I'll bet there was fear and I'll bet the next Sunday's offering was particularly good, don't you think? Ananias and Sapphira gave, but they gave reluctantly. The punishment might seem harsh to us, but it should tell us that God is not mocked, is He? By all means, avoid any

thoughts of extravagant giving. Let me give you some examples of extravagant giving in Scripture NOT to consider:

- Israel's lavish giving to the tabernacle (Exodus 36:1-7)
- The woman who anointed Jesus with expensive perfume (Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:37-38)
- The widow's gift in the temple – (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4)
- The early Church's generosity – (Acts 2:45)
- God's generosity to us – (The entire Bible)

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

I'll warn you, if you read these stories and think about them at all, the Holy Spirit will create in you a desire to sow generously and if you do that, you will reap generously. We don't want that to happen, do we? This is a message on how to be poor. So by all means, do not consider Christ and His sacrifice for you. If you do think about what He left in heaven's glory and His humiliation for our sins, and the incredible price He paid for us, it will engender a desire to be generous to God. In fact, if you want to be poor, I would recommend not thinking about Jesus at all. Also, since the whole Bible is about God's generous grace to us, reading the Bible should be avoided at all costs.

So if you go a Bible preaching church, try very hard not to listen, especially if the message is on generosity to God. Look like your listening, but don't listen. Count the lights or the ceiling tiles. Think about the week ahead. Think about other people that need to hear the message. Critique the pastor. Do whatever it takes lest a message on giving produce in you any desires to be generous to God. Because you know what happens when the Spirit starts to work in your life through His Word - you get generous with your things. Worse than that is that you start to think about them as not really being your things at all. You start to look at them as being God's and then it's just a small step to actually giving and enjoying it. Friends, please listen to me, don't let this happen!

3. Don't value the blessings God promises to give

The passage goes on to list promises God makes to those that give generously and joyously:

He will meet all of our needs (Verse 8)

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

He will increase the impact of our lives (Verse 10)

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

If you give to God, He will bear fruit from it. He promises to do so. This will give you joy to see your life and resources bearing spiritual fruit in your life and in your church and in your community. You'll get happy seeing people come to faith in Christ. You'll feel a connection to God's larger purposes. Your life will take on a meaning it didn't have before. This is a problem. So don't do it.

He will enrich our life's experience (Verse 11)

You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

God promises that He will enrich us. We clearly don't want that. The way God works is that when we give to Him, we not only have joy in giving, He gives us the ability to enjoy what's left even more than if we still had everything. In other words, if you just practice the basic tithe, He enriches us to have more joy in 90% than we ever have with 100%. He increases our happiness in what we have when we are generously giving to Him. The more generous we are to Him, the more joy we have in what we have left. 80% left is happier than having 90% left and so on. You don't want that!

Another thing God does to enrich us is that He has a way of making the 90% go further than the 100% ever did. You can talk to people in our church who have tried this. When they didn't give to God, they were always short and things didn't add up and they lived with fear that they couldn't make ends meet. When they started to give to God, things just started to work out. Cars lasted longer. Unexpected expenses weren't as common. 90% with God's favor feels better than 100% without it ever did.

And the worst thing of all is that God gives contentment to the giver. He increases our capacity to enjoy what we have. You don't want that, do you? To be satisfied in what He has given? To look at your life and feel all happy about how good He has been to you? Friends, I have known you a long time! I love you. Listen, don't let this happen! Contentment is way overrated.

My time is nearly up, so a few final tips for you: It's very important that you intentionally don't do anything. Try and surround yourself with people who don't do anything for God either. Admire the possessions of people who don't do anything since they bought the things with money that rightly should go to God.

I would also suggest that you avoid people who have recently gone on missions trips. They often come back challenged by American materialism. They might rub off on you.

Finally, and this is very important, do not think about eternity. Live for today. Get what you can now. Do what it takes. This will require great discipline, especially at funerals. Try not to think about laying up treasure in heaven and the eternal rewards God promises for generosity now. This will insure that you are poor now, and even more importantly, poor for eternity. If you follow all these principles today, you will be the man Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 – *Each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.* And that is how to be poor.

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