

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, August 21, 2011 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

The Cycle of Blessing - 2 Corinthians 8:10-24

Introduction: An elderly man bought a lottery ticket with a \$10 million prize. His children learned he had won, but because he had a bad heart, they were afraid to just tell him for fear that he would have a heart attack on the spot. So they decided to ask his pastor to break the news gently to him so it wouldn't put a strain on his heart.

The pastor called on his old friend and they chatted for awhile, and the pastor said, *"Let me ask you a question. If you learned suddenly you had won a 10 million dollar lottery, what would you do with it?"* Without hesitation the man said, *"I'd give a tenth of it to our church."* And the pastor had a heart attack on the spot!

If you've won the lottery, and you're feeling generous toward your church, I would like to talk with you! But more than that, I want to talk with you this morning about the generosity of God in pouring out the riches of His grace to us, so that in turn, we might learn about the grace of being generous to others.

We find this in the book of 2 Corinthians where Paul writes about an offering received from the churches to help the saints in Jerusalem who were suffering from a famine. Chapters 8 and 9 tell about this offering, but never once does the word *"money"* appear. Instead the concept of *"grace"* is found throughout. Let's read it.

10 And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.

11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality.

14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality,

15 as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

16 I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you.

17 For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative.

18 And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel.

19 What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.

20 We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift.

21 For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

22 In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you.

23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ.

*24 Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. **2 Corinthians 8:10-24 (NIV)***

Paul had critics in the church at Corinth who claimed that he was unfit to be an apostle. Part of their criticism might have been directed at how this offering was being handled, so that's why Paul bent over backward to explain that the offering was being handled with integrity and accountability. We can learn from that today. Because of financial abuses in some churches and religious organizations, it's important for us to handle God's money in an appropriate and accountable way.

But, again this message isn't about money; it's about learning to be gracious and generous. The economy in Corinth was vibrant and the believers had been blessed financially, so Paul reminds them that they have been blessed so they can share their blessings with others. So without talking about money, I want to share with you

how we have been blessed to be a blessing. It's a cycle of blessing if you will, and I would hope that everyone would want to get in on it. This cycle of blessing has four truths that we need to understand. The first truth is:

1. Every Blessing Comes from God.

In the old Jimmy Stewart movie "*Shenandoah*," Jimmy Stewart plays the role of a widowed farmer with seven kids during the Civil War. On his wife's deathbed, she made him promise to raise their children as "*good Christians*." In the opening scene, the family is seated at the dinner table and Jimmy Stewart tries to honor his wife's wishes by reluctantly praying this prayer: "*Lord, we cleared this land. We plowed it, sowed it, and harvested it. We cooked the harvest. It wouldn't be here and we wouldn't be eatin' it if we hadn't done it all ourselves. We worked dog-bone hard for every crumb and morsel. But we thank you just the same for this food we're about to eat. Amen.*"

Some think the reason they're blessed is because they've worked hard and deserve it. Deuteronomy 8:17 (NIV) says, "*You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.'*" But vs. 18 says, "*But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.*" Furthermore, James 1:17 (NIV) tells us that "*every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father.*" So it's clear that God's cycle of blessing begins when we acknowledge that every good thing in our life comes from God.

In vss. 14-15, Paul alludes to something that illustrates this truth. These verses refer to the miracle of God providing manna for the Israelites' nourishment as they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years on their way to the Promised land. Now the word "*manna*" literally means "*what is it?*" On the first morning the Hebrews saw it they said, "*What is this?*" It would be like you sitting down to food that you didn't recognize and asking, "*What is this?*" The Bible says the manna was a bread-like substance that appeared on the ground six days a week after the dew evaporated. It was round, sweet, and like a flake. I've always thought of it as resembling a cornflake.

Six days a week the Hebrew people went out and picked up the manna—one *omer* (about two quarts) for each person in their family. If they tried to save it for the next day, it would become rotten with maggots. But on Friday they would pick up twice as much so they wouldn't have to work on the Sabbath, and for that day, the manna would still be fresh. Vs. 15 is a quote from Exodus 16:18 and refers to the people gathering exactly what they needed each day as commanded by God. The point is, when the people did it God's way, He sustained them for 40 years as they made their way to the Promised Land. God supernaturally provided the manna; so no one could claim they had produced it themselves.

Now after a few years of eating manna, I would think the cooks had to get rather creative in preparing it. One day they had manna biscuits, the next day manna casserole, the next, manna soufflé, the next, a tomanna sandwich, then maybe for desert, they had bamanna bread. Now, if you went to eat at someone else's tent, after the meal, you'd thank your host for the meal, and they'd say, "*You're welcome. I created this manna myself.*" No, instead the host would say, "*Oh, don't thank me. Thank God. I didn't do anything except go out and pick it up. God is the one who provided this meal.*"

Well, we should say the same thing about every good thing in our lives. We didn't create it. God did. The cycle of blessing begins when we acknowledge that every blessing is from God. The second truth is this:

2. We Are Channels of Blessings, not Containers.

God gives us blessings for a reason: So we can be a blessing by sharing with others. But if we start hoarding or storing up our blessings, they become like day-old manna—rotten and stinky.

When God told Abraham to leave his homeland and his people and go to the land He was going to will show him, He said. "*I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.*" Genesis 12:2 (NIV). Now for a long time after that, it was just Abraham and his wife. I can imagine Abraham thought, "*Well, Lord, I don't see anything happening! If I'm going to have a family that becomes a great nation, you'd better get to work. 'cause we ain't gettin' any younger!*" Yet God later promised that Abraham's descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky and the grains of sands on the shore. God waited until Abraham and Sarah were well beyond child-producing age to give them a son, Isaac. He did this to show again that Abraham couldn't take credit for the blessing—it came from God.

But over the centuries, the nation of Israel became self-centered and forgot that God blessed them to BE a blessing to all nations. God chose the Israelites so they could tell all nations that there is a kind, loving Creator

who wants to have a relationship with all people, not only the Jews. But the Jews thought they were the *only* blessed people, so they developed an Us Against Them mentality. They came to the point where they thought there were only two kinds of people on earth: “*US: The blessed ones*” and “*THEM: The Gentiles, the unclean heathens.*” They became so intolerant of other nations, God had to send them into captivity to remind them that they weren’t supposed to store God’s blessings, they were blessed to share God’s blessing with all nations.

Sometimes we make the same mistake. When we receive God’s blessings, we start keeping them for ourselves instead of sharing our blessings with others. We are blessed to be a blessing.

A good illustration of this comes from the land of Israel itself. In Northern Israel lies the beautiful Sea of Galilee - a fresh water lake teeming with fish. It receives fresh water from the north and then the water flows out from the south side as the Jordan River. About 45 miles to the south, the Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea. It’s called the Dead Sea because it’s the lowest point on earth and nothing lives in it. The Dead Sea only receives water, it never passes it on. It’s a container instead of a channel. Blessed people are like the Sea of Galilee. We receive God’s fresh blessings and pass them on to others. But some people are like the Dead Sea, always receiving, but never sharing. If your life is dead, dull, and boring right now, it might be because you’ve become content to be a container instead of a channel of blessing to others.

Billy Graham wrote: “*God has given us two hands—one to receive with and the other to give with.*”

So every blessing comes from God, and we are channels of blessing not containers. The third truth is:

3. When We Bless Others, We Receive a Blessing.

We are often so selfish in our prayers. Our prayer becomes a shopping list that we present to God, where we are basically praying, “*God bless me, bless me, bless me.*” Instead, we should be praying, “*God MAKE me a blessing.*” Because when you bless others, you receive a blessing. This truth is repeated throughout the Bible. Jesus said, “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” Acts 20:35 (NIV) Proverbs 11:25 (NIV) says, “*A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*” Would you like to be refreshed? Then focus on refreshing others.

Look again at what Paul said in verse 14. As he addressed the wealthy Corinthians about giving a gift to benefit the poor believers in Jerusalem, he wrote, “*Your plenty will supply what they need so that in turn, their plenty will supply what you need.*” What did he mean by that? I don’t think he meant that in time the poor Jerusalem Christians would take up an offering and send it to the Corinthians. No, I think he was talking about how when we give unselfishly to others, they give us something we need—the blessing that comes from giving away something without expecting anything in return.

You know, a lot of what we call “*giving*” is actually just swapping. We give Christmas gifts and birthday presents to our family and friends because they give up Christmas gifts and birthday presents. “*Let’s see, she gave me a book last year, so I’ll give her a book.*” Or, “*He gave me a dozen Titleist golf balls, so I can’t give him a box of X-Outs.*” That’s not giving, that’s swapping.

True giving occurs when we give and we don’t expect anything in return except the blessing of giving the gift. True giving happens when missionaries go to a mission field to minister in Christ’s name, and they pay for the trip, and never receive a dime for their work. Their satisfaction comes from knowing they get to make a real difference in the lives of people whom God loves. Missionaries have discovered that they are blessed to be a blessing!

Have you discovered yet that God has blessed you so you can make a difference and BE a blessing to others? You really aren’t living until you discover this. Don’t be like this person who said about their life, “*First I was dying to finish high school and start college. And then I was dying to finish college and start working. And then I was dying to marry and have children. And then I was dying for my children to grow old enough for school so I could return to work. And then I was dying to retire. And now, I am dying...and suddenly I realize I forgot to live.*” Real living is found in God’s blessing cycle. This blessing cycle is really a life-cycle!

Finally, we need to understand this truth:

4. The More We Give Away, the More God Gives to Give Away.

Just as there are certain natural laws in effect in our universe, there are also spiritual laws in effect. The father of modern physics, Isaac Newton, didn’t discover the physical laws that govern our universe, he only observed and catalogued them. These unbreakable physical laws were already in effect. For instance, we are all aware of the law of gravity. If you jump off a 50-story building, you don’t break the law of gravity, you only

demonstrate it.

When I speak of spiritual laws, I'm not talking about the Old Testament commandments, or the Old Testament Law. I'm talking about unbreakable spiritual laws of cause and effect God established. For instance, there is the law of sowing and reaping. God's word says in Galatians 6:7b (NIV), "*A man reaps what he sows.*" There is another universal spiritual law Jesus gave in Luke 6:38 (NIV). He said, "*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*"

In Jesus' time, when people needed to carry something they often picked up the front hem of their robe to make a basket. That's the image Jesus is using here. When we give, we receive. And the measure we use to give is the same measure God uses to give to us. If we give with a thimble, we'll receive a thimble full of blessing. If we give with a bucket, we'll receive a bucket full of blessing. If we give with a tankcar, we'll receive a tankcar of blessing in return. Get it? But God's bucket is always bigger than mine, and His tankcar is always bigger than mine. God has already given us so much, and the cycle is activated when we give. When we do, God gives us more, and so we can give more away. And the cycle continues. But if we ever start keeping it to ourselves, the cycle is broken. God also can examine the motives of your heart. If you give so you can receive more to hold onto, the cycle doesn't work. But if you give so you can give more away, God keeps His part of the law.

God loves to give to His children. In fact, He wrote it in His word "*For God so loved the world that He GAVE...*" John 3:16:

Conclusion: In his book *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity* Chuck Swindoll tells about a man lost in the desert, thirsty for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old shack, and went inside to get out of the heat. Inside, he saw an old water pump. He quickly grabbed the handle and began to pump up and down, but nothing came out. He tried again, but no water came out. But then he noticed an old jug off to the side. Taped to the side of the jug was a message that read, "*You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug. P.S. Be sure to fill the jug again before you leave.*"

He popped the cork, and sure enough, it was almost full of water! Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live, but if he poured all the water into the old rusty pump, it might yield fresh water from the well—all the water he wanted. He pondered both options and wondered what he should do. Reluctantly, he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump—up and down, up and down up and down. After a few pumps, a little bit began to dribble out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed fourth fresh, cool water – more than even he could drink.

So, he filled the jug and drank from it, and he filled it another time and once again drank it up. Then he filled the jug to the top for the next traveler, popped the cork back on, and added this note: "*Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back.*"

It took faith for the thirsty man to take all the available water to prime the pump. Think of your resources as the jug of water—and then think of God's blessings as the cool, stream of gushing water. Where are you in God's cycle of blessing? Will you keep your stuff all to yourself, or will you, by faith, prime the pump of God's blessings? The choice is yours.