

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: Be Thou My Vision**

**Scott Dudley**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **2 Corinthians 8-9 (selected verses)**

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love. (2 Corinthians 8:8)

We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.... they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. (2 Corinthians 8:1-4)

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 through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

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. You will be enriched in every way ... and your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:10-11)

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### **Transcript:**

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Go ahead and have a seat. It's so good to have you here. Those of you who are joining online, thank you for joining us. And those of you in this room appreciate you being here on Sunday to worship with us. So I know that I have talked about the Mariners a lot recently.

Yes.

But let me just talk about them one more time because Shania really likes it when we talk about them. Let me just talk about them one more time because God and baseball, there's just a lot there. So my wife and I were in Europe when the Mariners clinched a playoff spot for the first time in 21 years. So we missed the game. We didn't get to see it. But then we started to think,

well, maybe the reason they got to the playoffs is because we weren't here to see it, because we took one for the team and went to Europe so that they could go to the playoffs. It was really very generous of us to do that.

Thank you.

You're welcome. However, dozens of you have pointed out that when we were gone they were winning, but the minute we came back, they lost. So next year my wife and I will spend all of October in Europe so the Mariners can win the World Series.

See what we do for you people? We are so generous. It'll be a sacrifice, but it'll be a generous act of service on our part. So we'll do that because we care.

We're doing a sermon series on following God's leading. And one of the things God will always lead us to do, not sometimes, always lead us to do, especially in uncertain times, is to be generous. And right now some of you're like, "Oh man, he said generous. That means he is going to talk about money." Those of you online, do not touch that computer. Okay? Do not log off. Do not log off. Yes, I'm going to talk a little bit about money, but not exclusively about money. Also, some other stuff. And we don't do a lot of sermons here on money. Actually, it's been a couple of years, but the Bible talks a lot about it. There are only 500 verses on prayer, but there are over 2000 verses on money.

I know. How we handle money is vital to our spiritual health, to our emotional health, to experience the presence of God, to be the people he wants us to be. How we handle money really affects how much joy we have. But it's not just money. There are lots of different ways to be generous. Time, for instance. It is way easier for me to be generous with my money than with my time. Some people aren't very emotionally generous. They're judgmental or they withhold love. I recently read a story about a football player who scored a game winning touchdown. And rather than kind of thumping on his chest and parading around like you see sometimes, he called all of his teammates together so that they could celebrate the win together. He was generous with sharing credit for the win, a thing so rare that it actually made the news.

There's lots of ways to be generous, and if we are following God, he will always lead us to be generous, not just with our money, but our time, our heart, our love, our affection, sharing credit, all of that. And that's good for us. Generosity is good for us. I'll say why in a minute. And it changes the world. And we see this in the New Testament, a book of Second Corinthians, chapter eight and nine, and we're going to look at some of those verses.

And the Apostle Paul is he's writing to the Christians in the city of Corinth and he's encouraging them to be generous in multiple ways. And he's trying to raise money to help people who are suffering from a famine. And the Corinthians have said that they're going to give, but saying that we're going to give and giving are two different things, aren't they? Because sometimes we

say we'll give, but then we add a four letter word, when. "I'll give when I have more time, I'll give when I have more money," but I'll give when I'm not giving.

So Paul writes this to the Corinthians to say, "Be the best version of you and follow through on those good intentions." But he's not just asking for financial generosity, he's also asking for relational generosity, because see, the Corinthians church is full of Gentile Christians, people with no Jewish background, but the people suffering from the famine are in Jerusalem, who are Jewish Christians. So he is trying to get Gentiles to give to Jews. But here's the thing, those two groups of people have hated each other for centuries. It was this intense ethnic conflict.

So Paul starts out and he says to them, "I am not commanding you." Now, he could have commanded them to give. And in fact, in his first letter to the Corinthians, he does command them to give because God commands us to give. So let me do just a little short digression on what's called tithing, which means to give 10% of our income to God. Tithe means a 10th. And many of you know about tithing because you're doing it, so thank you. Others of you don't know about tithing and others of you are working really hard to not know about tithing, to not have to think about tithing. But in the Old Testament, God commands us to give 10% of our income to the faith community that we're part of.

Now, sometimes folks will say, "Yeah, but does it really say 10%?" And you know what? You're right. It doesn't say 10%. There are a lot of verses where it does say 10%, like there. That's a lot of verses, isn't it? And they say things like a tithe of everything from the land belongs to the Lord. But you're right, it doesn't say 10%, because on top of the tithe, there were also special offerings throughout the year. So the average Israelite gave about 25% of their income, not 10. And now you're all like, "Okay, okay, it's 10, it's 10, it's 10. All right, it's 10."

The New Testament ups the ante and says that giving should be sacrificial. It should affect your lifestyle. There should be things you're not doing because you gave that money away. And now you're thinking you're going the wrong direction, pastor, you're going the wrong direction. But it really does. It really does say 10%. But does it really say 10% to your church? Again, yeah. God says things like, "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting." The Levites were the clergy. The tent of meeting was where they met, the church. In other words, give the tithe to your faith community.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul commands them to support those who preach the gospel. And he says, "Don't we have the right to food and drink?" It is written the law of Moses do not muzzle an ox while it's treading out the grain. In other words, you wouldn't put a muzzle on an ox's mouth so it couldn't eat. You would feed it so it could keep working. And Paul's saying, do that for your faith community. 10% to your faith community, which is why my wife and I give 10% here to this church. And then over and above that, we give to other Christian organizations, because see, when I just give, when we just try to give to our pet projects, that's not giving. That's us controlling our money and we're trying to control another organization by

what we give. That's not giving. 10% to our local church, to the faith community you're a part of.

And some of you're like, "Okay, but is it 10% of net or gross?" Oh, who cares? Just 10% of something. Just 10% of anything. 10% of anything. And that goes for all of us, high school students, elementary students. Everyone has time, everyone has money. So Paul could have commanded the Corinthians to give, but he's not just asking for financial generosity, he's also asking for relational generosity. So he says, "I'm not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love." See, if Gentile Christians give to help Jewish Christians, that could be a step toward reconciliation and healing between these two groups that have hated each other. Jesus says, "Where your treasure is there, your heart will also be." What we give to is what we love. So by giving to people that they don't like, they would be healing those divisions and opening their hearts to Jewish Christians. Relational generosity.

A woman I know told me recently that at her high school reunion, someone came up to her and said, "In high school you said hello to me every day and that made me feel so valuable." That's relational generosity. Could you, for instance, let someone in a hurry cut in line in front of you in a store to pay? And some of you are like, "I'd rather write a check." That's relational generosity. Or after church, say hello to someone who's a different age or a different race. And if you want to know how to do this really well, watch our high school students. They are amazing at this. And when people leave a church and say, "No one ever spoke to me," that's a lack of relational generosity.

Second, Paul is asking for courageous generosity. He says, "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." Macedonia is a different region than Corinth. "In the midst of a very severe trial," so uncertain times, "their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. They gave even beyond their ability. They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege, the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people." So even though they were poor, the Macedonian Christians gave very generously, and that takes courage. And Paul's telling this to the Corinthian Christians who have tons of money, and he's saying he's telling them to be give courageously to the point where they need to depend on God to provide for their needs, because there are people who are starving, and the only thing that's going to save them is courageous generosity.

Ask yourself, what risks am I willing to take to be faithful to God and to bless others? And if not, why not? Relational generosity, courageous generosity. There are all kinds of other ways of being generous, with our time, with our affection, with sharing credit, all kinds of different ways. So that raises the question, well, then how do we become more generous people? How do we become more generous? Well, first, to become more generous, we have to connect with our generous God. Paul says, "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 through his poverty might become rich. God left the perfection of heaven, came himself and the person of Jesus, died on a cross to pay the

price for our sins, to reconcile us to him. And then he rose from the dead. He is very generous to have done all of that for us."

He's like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son whose son runs away, squanders the family fortune in wild living. But when he comes back, the Father forgives him, restores him and throws a party for him, which is why the parable is misnamed, because the word Prodigal means lavish, willing to spend vast sums. So this is not the story of the Prodigal Son. It is the story of the Prodigal Father, our Prodigal God who lavishly spends everything he has on us. And when we connect with him in prayer and worship and scripture, he reorders our love, he reshapes our hearts and he makes us generous, which leads to the second way we become more generous, and that is to know that giving turns us into better people. It just turns us into better people.

Paul 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. You'll be enriched in every way and your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God." Harvest of righteousness. Righteousness doesn't mean self-righteous or even moral in the Bible. Righteousness means being rightly related to God, each other and the world. In other words, when we give, it changes us to be more like Jesus. Why does God command us to give? Not because he needs it, but because we need it. It changes us for the better when we give. And if we're not generous, we all see the results of non-generosity, right? If we're not generous, it rots our souls and we become completely self-focused. And pretty soon you're that person yelling at the barista because they forgot to put vanilla almond, soy milk in your latte. Karen, right? My apologies to people named Karen.

Giving turns us into better people in at least five ways. First, we worry less about money because we see God provide for us. It's ironic, it's paradoxical, but the more we give, the less we worry about money. Paul says, "He who supplied seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed." And many of you have seen this. You give generously and then somehow you end up with more money than you started with before you gave, right? And that doesn't always happen, but it often happens.

Second way giving makes us better people is we discover the joy of less. That we can actually be happier with less rather than a frantic life of acquisition of stuff and money and vacations and houses and trips and cars and all of that. Third way giving makes us better, we see God use our money to change people's lives and that just feels good.

Fourth, it increases our gratitude. Paul says, "Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God." And I've seen this in my own kids. Even if we do something as simple as take them out to eat in a restaurant, they will always say thank you. And I think part of the reason for that is when they were growing up, we taught them that no, we can't do everything you want to do. We can't do everything we want to do because we gave some of that money away for God's purposes. And so now when we do something special, they appreciate it more.

And the fifth way giving makes us better people is you get a greater certainty that God is real because you see him provide. And one of the best ways I have experienced to know that God really is real is giving, and I've just seen him provide over and over again, and that increases my faith and my certainty that he's there. When we give, we love more and we worry less. It makes us better people. To become more generous, connect with our generous God, remember that giving turns us into better people, and then third, take joy in healing the world. When we give, we heal the world. The world would be a much better place if every Christian in the world would just tithe.

In the Bible, God says, "There need to be no poor among you if only you fully obey the Lord your God." If every Christian in America tithed, we could eliminate global poverty. See, we don't need to be radical to get rid of poverty. We just need to be biblical to get rid of poverty. And so many of you do this. You are extremely generous. Thank you so much. Thank you. But some of you are missing the blessing and you don't know how much of a blessing it is until you actually start to tithe. And then once you do, you never go back. I have never met a person who said, "Yeah, I started to tithe. I didn't like it, so I quit." Never met that person. You just don't. You realize what a blessing it is when you start to do it.

And multiple surveys show that Christians give more than the general public gives. Christians give more than the general public, but it's still only around 3% or a little bit less. It's not 10%. And a lot of people don't give anything except maybe dropping a 20 or a five in the offering plate every once in a while. Given the median income of our area, what do you think our church's budget would be if everyone in this church tithed? \$34 million. And imagine what we could do with that money. Imagine, think of the lives we could change without money. And we have a long history as a church of not just keeping all the money we get to ourselves, but of giving it out, giving it away to help people in need in our community and in our world. We have a long history of doing that. We change lives when we give lives inside this church and outside this church.

Just this week I heard a testimony from a man who was heavy into drinking and drugs, got arrested on several occasions, moved here to Bellevue for a job. And his dad said, "You need to go to church." So he googled Bellevue Church in Bellevue, found us, came here, and then he kept coming back. And over the course of a decade. He discovered Jesus here. He got free of his addiction here. He found community here. And then he began to change other people's lives by mentoring Eastside Academy students. If you give here, God did that through you.

A few weeks ago, a psychology professor sent me this chart. Rates of depression in our country over the last 15 years. That blue line is 12 to 17 year olds. The orange line, 18 to 25 year olds. Look at that. Our culture is shredding our young people, shredding them. And a few months ago we heard a testimony here from a high school student who grew up in this church and in seventh grade plunged into a deep depression that turned into suicidal thoughts and self-harm. And she went to therapists, which helped, but she was still struggling. And then one weekend she and

her dad were out on a boat when a storm came up and threatened to swamp the boat. And she started to pray, "Lord, calm the storm so I can rest." Over and over, "Lord, calm the storm so I can rest."

Well the storm didn't stop but they were able to make it to safety. But when she got home, something had shifted. Her depression was gone. And a few weeks later, it was still gone, and it stayed gone permanently. And then she remembered the prayer she prayed in the boat, "Lord, calm the storm so I can rest." Jesus did not calm the storm outside of her, but Jesus did calm the storm inside of her. Jesus, who she met in part because of the ministries of this church. If you give here, God did that through you.

You just heard an update from our Congo team, from the trip that we took to Congo in June. And I was on that trip and we flew into Mayombe, which is where a lot of the ethnic violence is taking place, landed on a grass airstrip, and there was this big group of people there, smiling and singing and dancing to welcome us. And through your generosity we've been able to supply essential needs there, like food and clothing. And all the kids were wearing this shirt, grateful children with the Bell Press logo on it just to say thank you because they're so grateful for what we gave.

But I think one of the most important things we did there was simply just to go. The fact that a group of Americans set foot on Mayombe soil in spite of all the ethnic violence going on around them communicated so much. And it said to them, "Jesus has heard your cry and you are not alone. We are with you." If you give here, God did that through you.

And whenever I hear these stories, I am so grateful to know that the money I give here helped make these things happen. And when you hear these stories, I want all of you, every single person to know the blessing of being able to think because I gave, I helped make that happen. Don't miss out on the blessing.

So action step for this week is the same as it was last week, pray and listen, and ask God the following questions: Jesus, show me how generous you have been to me. And then Jesus, where and how are you asking me to be generous with my money, my time, my heart? And then pay attention to those thoughts that come from God, and then do what he says to do. That's the action step. That's it. No other action step.

Now, you would think that coming out of this sermon, there'd be a second action step, right? To start tithing if you're not doing it or at least start working toward tithing, but I'm not going to say that. I'm not going to put that kind of pressure on you. Sort of like a story I heard about a man who was walking down the street, and he heard a woman calling for help, so we ran over to her, and this woman's little two year old boy had swallowed a quarter and he couldn't get it out. So this man picked the little boy up, turned him over his arm, did the Heimlich maneuver,

and the quarter came out. And the woman said, "Oh, thank you so much. You knew just how to get that coin out of him. Are you a doctor?" And he said, "No, I work for the IRS."

Okay, that's not Jesus. Jesus is not going to Heimlich maneuver money out of you, and neither am I because I know, I know, I know that if you pray and listen, God will lead you to be generous, because God always leads us to be generous when we listen to him.

Rich Sterns, who is president of the relief organization World Vision talks about, back in 1987, after one of the biggest stock market crashes ever, he and his wife lost more than a third of their life savings and what they had saved for their kids' college. And he said, "I was consumed with anguish, and I worked past midnight every night looking at spreadsheets of all the money that we had lost night after night after night, just in anguish over the money we'd lost."

And finally his wife said, "This is killing. You got to learn to trust God on this. So I think we need to pray." So they prayed, and after they were done praying, his wife said, "Okay, I think now in order to trust God, we need to get out our checkbook and write some really big checks to our church and to the missions we support." And Rich Stern said, "I was horrified, but I knew that she was right." So we wrote some really big checks and we mailed them and he said, "That's when I felt the relief. We had broken the spell that money had cast over me. It freed me from the worries that had consumed me. I felt reckless and giddy. God, please catch us because we just took a crazy leap of faith. And God did. God provided and we saw that God was real."

When we are generous, not just with our money, but our time, our hearts, everything we've got, our affirmation, when we are generous, we set ourselves free, and God uses what we give to change the world. A fearful world needs a courageous church. A divided world needs a united church. A hopeless world needs a church filled with hope, and a selfish world where everyone is demanding their rights needs a generous church to bring Jesus love and healing.

Because someone whose name I do not know gave to the church my parents went to, I accepted Jesus as my savior in Sunday school when I was six years old. And even though I wandered away from him for years, the seed that church planted grew and it brought me back to him. Because someone whose name I do not know gave, I found a college group when I was in college that led me back to Jesus and disciplined me in how to follow him more. Because someone whose name I do not know gave, I was able to heal from a divorce at Menlo Park Church and find gifts I didn't know I had that led me into ministry.

Because you give, thousands of people who do not know your name are finding Jesus, healing from addictions, transforming their marriages, and bringing God's kingdom wherever they are. Because you give, hundreds of kids and students who do not know your name are finding Jesus and the support they need right here at Bell Press. Because you give, kids in Congo did not die. And when those saints go marching in, I want to be one of them, and I know you do too, and



hear them tell the stories and hear them say, "Look what God did with my life because you gave."

So Jesus, thank you that you are a generous God and Lord, we ask that you would make us generous as well. Open our hearts. Help us experience how you have been generous with us so that we become more generous with our time, with our affection, with our encouragement, and with our money. And then, Lord, help us to see all that you do, all the lives you change because of what we give. Lord, you have given us everything. You have given us yourself. Teach us to respond in kind. We ask this in your name, Lord. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Icebreaker Question:** What "chore" do you secretly really love to do?

**Opening Question:** Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In what ways have you experienced God's generosity toward you?
- In what ways is God calling you to be more generous with your time, money, heart, etc.

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.