

## **Affliction Into Generosity**

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2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Sometimes people can begin pondering interesting things. Mandy was pondering the power of a smile, wondering how far it could go. She woke up one morning with a busy schedule of errands thinking that she'd try an experiment. She was going to offer a generous smile and be kind to everyone she met that day to see what happened.

With perhaps a bit of nervous excitement she headed out the door on her way to the store for grocery shopping. On the way, she got held up by a very long train. She sat for six minutes waiting! While sitting there, she looked around and saw a child in the backseat of the car next to hers. Aha! her first opportunity of the day.

She first traded waves and a smile, then goofy smiles, and ended up having fun making funny faces back and forth and laughing with the little back-seat boy. When the train finally made it past, she felt energized as she pulled out through the intersection.

Later, at the store, Mandy pushed her shopping cart past a mom and daughter and said "Hi!" then cracked simple a joke. The daughter asked her if she always talked to strangers. "Sometimes," she said, "I'm trying to be friendlier these days."

The mom turned around and Mandy noticed a familiar face. The woman pointed out that she knew Mandy from her neighborhood. She recalled how they had met at a neighborhood Christmas party several years ago and talked about their mutual love of pets. She even remembered how Mandy had recommended to her a really good vet.

All smiles, they chatted for a moment or two, and then set up a time to get together for tea on another day.

As she was making it from the checkout counter to the door, she helped an older woman pull a shopping cart free from the cart corral, and received a big smile and thank you from the woman.

As she was exiting the store, Mandy watched a gust of wind grab a woman's hat right off her head and send it tumbling down the sidewalk. Mandy went running after it and gave the hat back to the woman with a smile and a wish

for a good day. She got a few steps and heard the woman call back “Thank you, and you have a great day too!”

And she continued to her car with a smile realizing that her life was full. She was indeed having a great day! And a good part of it was because of her commitment to offer a generous smile and be kind to everyone she met.

There is a lot written about generosity in the Bible. This morning’s passage is from the second letter a man named Paul wrote to home churches in the city of Corinth.

In this passage, Paul wrote about the people’s generous spirit.

### **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-7**

The churches in Corinth had done a remarkable thing. Actually, it was even unexpected for Paul. They had pooled together a remarkably large sum of money to support the bigger mission of growing churches throughout Macedonia, (Philippi and Thessalonica, and other communities) and even the impoverished church in Jerusalem.

They had been collecting this money and sending it along with Paul and his companions to the leaders of these other churches,

and it truly moved Paul to see their generosity.

Why was this so remarkable and important?

The Jerusalem Church had been at one time exclusively Jewish. But Paul started up all these small congregations throughout the Mediterranean basin made up mostly of people who were not Jewish, but Gentile.

Jews and Gentiles could not have more divergent cultures from one another, but Paul wanted these new Gentile believers to know that they belonged to the bigger family of God. He also wanted the Jewish Christians to understand that God was expanding their family to include these others who didn’t typically belong or culturally fit in Jewish circles.

Paul wanted to demonstrate that Gentiles and Jews alike belonged together in God’s family. This was both an uphill argument to make and a fine line to walk.

The leaders among the Jerusalem Church could very well snub their noses at Paul’s effort and discard him.

Imagine Paul carrying bags of hard earned money that had been given sacrificially, but wholeheartedly and

generously by people who were not so wealthy in Corinth into the poor church in Jerusalem. He would be carrying these bags of money into a place where those who gave the money may not be welcome.

But would their money be welcome?

Would the gift be accepted?

Perhaps the gift could be a sort of peace offering to help bridge the divide between people who existed in completely separate worlds?

This was Paul's hope, but a risky endeavor and the people of Corinth knew it. They also felt the tension. But they were giving generously nonetheless.

Now let's step into the world of these Gentile churches in Corinth for a moment and consider why they had been so generous.

Paul said that they had suffered great affliction and were quite poor. Perhaps they had lost jobs and income as a result of following Jesus, and perhaps they had been living in poverty. Regardless of how they became poor, it seems they gave well beyond their means for this cause that Paul was championing.

They gave, not simply because Paul preached a good sermon about the need to give generously. They gave because they believed so strongly in the vision of what God was doing through Paul and among them as a new community of people.

The passage also says that before giving they first gave themselves to the Lord. Their primary commitment was not actually to Paul, but to God.

The good news about Jesus had taken shape in their lives and they were so grateful that they gave with near reckless generosity for the sake of building the church.

It very well may be the case that their great generosity was born out of their own affliction — out of how God met them in their own poverty. They knew the challenges of taking on this risky life as a follower of Jesus, and therefore were more generous to support others who were willing to walk the same road.

I heard about a pastor one time who years ago was heading into the pulpit one Sunday morning to give his congregation a stern talking to about their level of giving to the church. It wasn't that they were giving too little. He felt they were giving far too much — well beyond their means. Doing this, he

felt, might leave them too little to live on themselves. He was worried that they would suffer significantly as a result of giving too much.

Paul was perhaps feeling like this pastor — a bit embarrassed observing the degree of the people's generosity.

The only word that Paul can find to describe this kind of giving is GRACE. He understood that the kind of generosity he saw in them was not the result of working out a logical budget, but was prompted from a deeper place — from the Holy Spirit's transforming power in their lives.

The Holy Spirit is the source of abundant generosity in our neighborhoods, families, and community.

Do you think your neighborhood and family could use a bit more generosity?

It doesn't come simply from trying harder to be generous. The most profound and powerful generosity comes from tapping into the work of God in your own life.

Consider where God has been at work in your life in the past and now in the present? It might help

to do this reflection with friends or family.

One way of getting at this is to think about God's presence like a lantern of light that has traveled with you your whole life.

- The light of that lantern has shown you the path of good choices.
- It has illuminated the truth in front of you and within you.
- That light has taught you how to learn from mistakes and grow with inner integrity.
- That light has made you wise and deepened your character.
- The light from that lantern has protected you in dangerous situations.
- That light has provided strength when you have been weak.
- The light that you have carried has brought good people into your life and allowed you to contribute to others.
- That light has allowed you to experience forgiveness when you have hurt others or been burdened with guilt.

How would you describe the power of that light in your life — the presence of God in your life? What has been possible in your life because of that light you have carried?

Perhaps you have never thought of it this way, but consider that it was God's light that transformed your life and brought you to where you are today.

Consider that you have the ability and even the opportunity and privilege to share that light with others.

How might you generously share that light?

Perhaps you are like Mandy and can commit to being generous sharing your smile and being kind. Maybe you can share your time, give your attention, or your life energy. Perhaps you can be generous by sharing your money, sharing your skills and wisdom and be a mentor to a person younger in their faith who needs life direction.

I am convinced that when we tap into the generous way that God's light has transformed us, we will be abundantly generous in the way we give to others.

Doing this keeps in circulation and grows the generosity of God's love

in the world — and that light has power to transform lives, and communities.