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GOD'S BLESSING CYCLE (PART 2)

2 Corinthians Series | 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

[PRAYER] Lord, it's fun to sing all of those songs about you being the King and our glorious King and our eternal King. All of those things are exciting to us to imagine, not only the kingship of your coming to earth the first time, but also we look forward to your coming again. You'll ride in on a white horse and be raptured and great things happen in that second coming. We're looking forward to that, Father. But in the meantime we're here on earth and we are serving you and we want you to speak to us and tell us what we should do. So we're asking you now to talk to us, to give us insight into your word and give us guidance into how to be the people you want us to be. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Last week we started a two-part sermon. It's really one sermon, but I just couldn't fit it all into thirty or thirty-five minutes, so we're on the second part. So if you didn't get to hear last week, I'll do a little bit of review. But you might want to go back and listen to it. We're looking at the cycle of blessing that God invites us into.

I'm just awestruck by the privilege that we have to be part of what God wants to do in the world. The Bible was written, not just to be this book of rules or book of ideas to be successful. The Bible was written primarily to understand who God is, to understand who we are, and to understand His plan and how we can fit into it. That's why we have God's word. So we want to be looking at it in that regard and tie into what God wants to do in your world just right around you. It's a privilege to be a part of what God wants to do.

I want to invite you to stand with me. We're going to look at and read a passage of scripture. This is 2 Corinthians 9. So stand with me. You can open your Bibles if you'd like to the passage or you can read it from the screen. I'm going to read it out loud and we will be talking about this as we continue to understand the cycle of blessing.

2 Corinthians 9 – There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people. For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given.

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever."

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 so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

You may be seated.

We're looking at the cycle of blessing. These are the parts that we covered last week. I want you to note that the cycle of blessing starts with God's grace to us. It's a very important place to start because if you think about financial giving as a list of rules or expectations from the outside, then it really dampens the blessing that you might have through financial giving. But if you recognize that God has started it all, that it starts up there with His graciousness, then your giving flows out of that. So God gives this grace.

Here's a verse from Psalm 86:15. It says this: *But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.* Compassionate and gracious. Keep those words in mind as we look at the cycle of blessing because it starts with the Father. It starts with God and His grace. If we start there, we end up in a pretty good place recognizing His grace.

Well the cycle continues with an invitation. It's an invitation, not a command, he says in this passage in 2 Corinthians 8. It's an invitation to join in the blessing that God makes available to all of us. And then we enter this cycle that's going to have four different parts to it.

The first part is gratefulness or thankfulness. We're thankful to God for what He's done. And so what do we do? We dedicate our whole hearts to the Lord. It's not just about our money. It's about our whole lives. Notice in the passage that I didn't read today, but from last week, it says – *They gave themselves first of all to the Lord.* They gave themselves. It is so great that there's a dedication that takes place on their own on their hearts before the Lord before we even start talking about the finances that they have. So that prompts dedication. That's the first part of this cycle. When we get down into it, the thankfulness that we have toward God prompts us toward dedication of our hearts and our lives before God.

Let me just pause here. If you haven't done that yet, if you haven't given yourself to God, I want to encourage you to do that today. It is an opportunity for you to join in with God, what He has planned, and what He wants to do in your life and the lives of those around you.

Well once we have that part down, then we have this practice the *grace of giving*. Interesting words that he describes – *excel in the grace of giving*. It's part of who you are. So if we look at this verse in verse 7 it says notice all the different parts and the grace of giving is just added to that. You *excel at everything. In faith*, so you're growing in your faith. *Your speech* is becoming more gracious. You're growing in *knowledge, in complete earnestness and love we have kindled in you. See that you also excel in this grace of giving*. So giving is not just one standalone thing. It's part of the bigger picture of what God wants to do in your life and my life. It's coming to this place of spiritual maturity. If you're going to be a disciple of Christ then it's going to affect all these areas of your life, including this grace of giving that he mentions.

Billy Graham says it this way: "God has given us two hands, one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns made for hoarding; we are channels made for sharing."

That's where we left off last week, okay? The practice of the grace of giving. Now we add another component to this cycle of blessing, which is pretty exciting. I suppose it would be obvious that if you give then others are receiving a blessing. Let's look at the verses and see what they say before we come back to our diagram.

In verses 13 of chapter 8 it says this: *Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.*

What is he talking about here? Well if you remember in our story there's the Jerusalem church that is suffering under a famine. They're the mother church. They're the church from which all the other churches came from. They're suffering because of a famine, so there's a lot of poverty that exists there. The Macedonian churches had been giving and delighting in giving. We'll see some verses describing them in a few moments. But they're doing pretty well at that. But the Corinthians are being exhorted by Paul now to participate in the gift. In other words give to what's going to happen in order to bless the people in Jerusalem. So Paul is saying that *at the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.*

Does that mean they're going to take an offering in the Jerusalem church? Are they going to give money back to the Corinthian church? I don't think so. I think the needs that we have are met in different ways. Certainly we give money to the church to help it be what it's supposed to be, but we all receive from it. We benefit from God's church. It may be financially, as we support and help different people financially. But it may be something completely different. It may mean that the friends that you have as result of God's church or the inspiration that you receive from the church. I know there's a lot of helping that goes on among the different people. You hear that this person can do that or this person can do that and there's blessings that come from being part of God's church. So the needs that are meant may be different than the ones that are being sent.

We all benefit from being part of the church. It's God's vehicle for change in our world today. So it's a privilege for us to be a part of a church.

I'd encourage you to get involved. Get connected somehow. If your habit is to show up late and leave early when you come on Sunday morning, you're missing a whole bunch of what the church is designed to be. Being involved in a small group, for example, is a great way to be connected and to find encouragement. When you're sick, people take food over. I mean things start happening in the midst of all of that that are encouraging. And just the ability to pray for each other. To be able to attend the prayer meeting that happens once a month on Saturday evening, or come here on Sunday mornings and pray with us. Just other people praying. It's all the benefits we receive about being part of the church. Yes, we contribute. We also receive blessings.

I want you to see this one little mark I put on our diagram at the bottom, the little arrow at the bottom. You see that? The reason I put the arrow at the bottom is because when others receive a blessing, it starts the cycle of blessing for them.

Now we're imagining ourselves primarily as the people of giving, but let's imagine us as the people receiving. If you have received from God a blessing of some kind, what does that do for you? You want to share that with others. So this little arrow takes you down to experience God's grace, the temptation for you to enjoy the blessing, and then this big cycle of blessing continues and God does some amazing things in lots of people's lives. It's a cycle that continues on, not just in my life, but in the lives of other people who are ministered to and then you minister to other people and you minister to me. There's this big cycle that's going on that's just amazing. It's really a miraculous organism, the church that God has created.

Well of course then when you give, someone else is blessed by that. But there's this other part that the scriptures are talking about that you're blessed. Then you know this experience. When you give, there's a blessing that happens inside of you and God does something.

I want to help you understand what that blessing looks like. There are three primary words that I think get you into the blessing cycle. Three primary concepts. They are thankfulness, contentment, and generosity. Thankfulness we've already talked about. Contentment I'm about to talk about. And generosity is talked about throughout the passage. Thankfulness, contentment, and generosity.

In order to understand them, let's go back to our verses 13 and 15 and let's look at this last statement that we haven't looked at yet, the one that starts with a goal. *The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."* It doesn't sound like much, but if you know where the quote comes from, that is a story. Because it's a quote from Exodus, the story of the manna coming down. When you understand about the manna, then you understand why it fits right here in the passage.

This is how the story goes. God rescued His people out of Egypt, a very difficult place for them, a painful place where they were suffering under harshness, under mistreatment, injustice, painful

situations. People yelling at them all the time, treating them unfairly. God rescued them out of there. That's great.

I know that some of you have been rescued out of bad situations and now you're in a new situation, but as you know, the pain of the past situation travels with you, doesn't it? So these people now come out of Egypt. They're rescued. And they're in a real struggle now to develop a new identity, to become this people of God.

So God is going to take them around in the wilderness. They go in the Promised Land. They're obviously not ready to go into there, so they wander around for forty years. And it's forty years of training God's going to do to rebuild them in their own hearts. Now that's really interesting, I find. Because He does a lot of things in the midst of that forty years to build into them the things they're going to need to be a blessing, to join the blessing cycle.

God had promised them a family, Abraham and all these Jewish people. *"It's through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.* You are part of the blessing cycle," He says to those people of Abraham. And now all these Jewish people are coming out of Egypt where they've been mistreated and now they're developing this new identity. They need three things. They need thankfulness, they need contentment, and they need generosity. God is going to start building those things into them.

If you remember, there was a lot of complaining going on where they needed to be more thankful and they needed to be more content. But one of the things God does is He gives them a gift of food every day. Food that would come down from heaven and it would be there in the morning. The dew would come and (I don't know) maybe the dew protected it somehow. But this manna would come down.

The first day when they went out to find it, they looked at it and they said, "What is it?" In Hebrew "what is it" is translated *mon-hu*. *Mon-hu!* What is it? What is it? Now we translate that manna, and that's what we gave it. It's what-is-it biscuits and what-is-it wafers and all these things that they have out of this manna. The Bible describes the manna as it's *white like coriander seed and like a wafer made with honey*. I don't know what that's like, but it sure sounds like it was good and they enjoyed it. It was supply that God gave them.

Number one lesson from the manna is that all that you have and need comes from God. You'll be able to take these principles and apply them to your own finances and the needs that you have in your life. But the point is that the first principle is everything you need, everything you have comes from the Lord.

Secondly, it comes daily. It's daily grace that He gave them. In fact He told them this: "When you gather the manna, take an omer." That's a container of weight and space. "Fill it up with an omer, one for everybody in your family." So now you have all of this. Now some people gathered more than an omer, some gathered less. But "take what you need" is what He said. So they went out and gathered all of the omers of manna. And then you know what happened after a little while? It melted away and it was gone. So you got what you needed. So another principle is

you need to work to get it. So He sends them out to go do the work. He doesn't just drop it on them and they start eating. They had to go out and gather it every day.

The next principle that we learn about the manna is that it doesn't last. It's not something you can store up. You need to be content with what you have. Some people were not. So they gathered more. They gathered more manna together. And the Bible says that the next morning the extra manna they had had maggots in it and it stunk. I just think that's a great analogy for those of us who tend to want to hoard things. We need to recognize God's grace is good every day for today. He wanted to teach them that.

Now you can imagine people who've gone through pain in their lives, mistreatment, a lot of yelling, unfairness. They respond often with being more self-focused and wanting more control. So those kind of people are the ones who are going to gather more because they're afraid. They live in fear. So they want to hoard stuff and they want to keep it and it's a mistake. So God is going to do some things in the lives of the Hebrew people to bring about healing to overcome the pain that they've experienced.

There are a lot of people in our world today who have experienced posttraumatic stress because of painful things in the past. Yet God has created us with the ability to heal if certain things are in place. I would suggest that becoming part of the blessing cycle is part of the healing that takes place in our lives. Because we need three things. We need thankfulness, we need contentment, and we need generosity. As we do, we begin to trust God more.

Forty years of this. Forty years of every day going out and just getting enough manna for today. Except on the sixth day a miracle would take place. Because on the sixth day you would gather twice as much and it would not rot so that you would have it on the Sabbath, which you were to dedicate to the Lord. Just a fascinating picture of what God was doing in their lives to bring about some change inside of their hearts to prepare them for going into the Promised Land, a land that would be characterized by "flowing with milk and honey." Lots of blessing that they would experience.

Would they be able to be generous? Would they be able to be kind to other people? Well this culture is like the history of generosity. Even while they're wandering around in the wilderness, non-Jewish people would be embraced into the Jewish community. They reached out to them. When they go into the Promised Land, God tells them when you plow your land (because then you'll have land to actually grow crops on, you can look forward to that), when you get there and you plow or harvest around the field, harvest it in a square to leave the extras for those who can come by. Be generous with the sojourner in the land, with the person who is poor and doesn't have what they need. Generosity was going to be a part of what God wanted to do with them because it's through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

The lesson of the manna is primarily a lesson in our passage about contentment. Where he says here – *The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.* The idea is that they were able to have just what they needed. Contentment is one of those principles that we need in order to enter the blessing cycle.

As we do get into this blessing cycle, we recognize that we are blessed because here's what happens to us. When we give and we contribute, as we're part of that blessing cycle we're gaining three things – more gratefulness, more contentment, and more generosity. Three things that bring healing into our own lives. Three things that kind of have a cycle inside of us that God does to strengthen us in some very powerful ways.

Now as I'm drawing the diagram and imagining where it goes from here, I thought maybe we'll have another arrow going up to thankfulness because I'm thankful for the things I get and then I want to give more and so on. But I don't think it does that. I think that the line goes up to the Lord, which I'll show you in a minute.

Let's look at these verses that just illustrate this idea of blessing that we receive when we are part of the blessing cycle. These first verses are about the Macedonians. In verse 4 of chapter 8 it says this: *they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.*

Now here's these people. They've gone through some suffering, some challenges, but they're pleading for the privilege of being a part of the blessing cycle. When we're going on a mission trip and we say, "Hey team, let's go out and raise money for the trip. Let's tell your friends about it and they can contribute." Sometimes someone will say to me, "Oh. I don't want to ask my friends for money." And I say, "Wait a minute. You've got the wrong idea here. It is a privilege to be a part of what is going on in missions." It's a privilege to support someone like Lisa Dammann who's going down to Texas. It's a privilege to be a part. Do you know why I support? Because I want to be part of the blessing. I want to hear the stories that are going on. I want to know what's going in her life and in the people that she's going to minister to. Because I'm part of the blessing cycle and so is she and there's some blessing that she's going to be a part of that I want to hear about. That's why the Macedonians are pleading for the privilege of sharing in this service of the Lord's people.

I like the next verse. Back in verse 2 it says: *In the midst of a very severe trial...* So these are the people that are struggling, the Macedonians. They're having some challenges, they've got some real severe trials in their lives. They have *their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty* (I like these next words) *welled up*. What does that tell you about this blessing cycle? It's not something that's a top-down kind of a thing. You've got to get this. It's so important.

Today is a very special day for my son, Josh, because this morning they're starting their first worship service in Baltimore. They're planting a church there. They've been doing this for over a year now. They've been meeting in the afternoons on Sunday, but today is their first Sunday morning service. So we're rejoicing with them. He's praying the Lord will bring forty people to come today. I'm eager to find out how it went.

But Josh was telling me this week that he's been teaching and one of the African-American families said, "This is so refreshing." They came from a black church and this particular black church had a heavy emphasis on giving – if you're coming to church are you giving, and tracing it. There was a heavy-handedness that was on people that was oppressive almost. So for them to come to a church that had a different view of how we handle grace and this motivation, it's just

so powerful. They're so excited to be a part of the church there, Haven City Church, in Baltimore.

But notice the words that it says there. *Their extreme poverty and overflowing joy welled up.* It came from the inside. I want to give. And there's our word *generosity*.

Other passages of scripture talk to us about this blessing or the things we receive. Jesus said *it is more blessed to give than to receive*. Proverbs 11:25 says – *A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.*

So now we come back to our diagram and where does the arrow go? I would suggest it goes right up to God again. When you're blessed you recognize that it is God who is doing the blessing. There is so much graciousness in God Himself that it goes back to that invitation that back into the cycle of blessing that we want to be a part of. It's perpetuating. It's powerful.

This idea is taught elsewhere in the scriptures about the cycle of blessing. Let me just show you a couple of them. In Luke 6:38 it says – *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.* So Jesus is talking there about the blessing cycle and what it looks like.

Another great passage in Malachi 4 is this one: *“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this.”* It's the only place in the Bible where God says, “Test me,” about something. It's an invitation is what He's saying. Test me. Come on. You're going to like this. This is the blessing cycle. Let's be a part of this. *“Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.”* The blessing cycle. *“I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the Lord Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.*

God wants to do something in our lives and it's pretty powerful. He invites us to be part of something big. It's this blessing cycle. That's a picture of the blessing cycle, of what it looks like. I would just suggest that God wants to do something in each one of our lives.

Now I'm going to read 2 Corinthians 9, at least part of the passage we read earlier. Because now that you've heard what I've said, as I read through it I want you to see the word *thankfulness*, I want you to see the word *blessing*, I want you to see the word *generous* in this passage as Paul is instructing the Corinthians.

Listen to these words. *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Notice how much internal motivation is emphasized there. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every*

good work. As it is written: "They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever."

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 so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Just noticed the words: Contentment, generosity, thanksgiving.

This service that you perform (because giving is an act of serving. That's what it is. It's serving the Lord) is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ (see, the blessing cycle continues on to other people), and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

The blessing cycle. Be a part of something big. I would suggest that when we become a Christian God adopts us into His family.

Yesterday I was talking to a parent of a ten-year-old adopted girl. We've been working together for several weeks now. This girl was adopted into their home when she was four years old. Four years old. But the period of time before four for her was characterized by a lot of turmoil, pain, mistreatment, and so on. So this little girl has posttraumatic stress disorder.

Now she comes into this home and she's been living there for some time and in the midst of the work, it's been hard for the parents to raise her because she's rather self-absorbed. She gets angry a lot. She doesn't think about other people. She primarily thinks about herself. She's protecting herself and she's doing it in ways that are unhealthy, unhelpful, ungodly, and she needs to learn how to relate differently. She is learning some valuable things and I'm excited about the things that she's learning.

But as I'm talking to the parents about their little girl, it reminds me about how many people in our world today are in pain and they're challenged and they're struggling because of the mistreatment, because of the difficulties, whatever they might be, the trauma, the stress. Because when the stress happens in a person's life, the person develops patterns, and these patterns start affecting them in ways that aren't good. So what needs to happen is they need to be adopted into a family and that's what God is all about. He adopts people into His family.

When you get adopted into God's family, do you know what happens? You get a new name. You get a new set of guidelines for living. You get new brothers and sisters. You get a new identity. When you're adopted into a new family, life changes. And when that happens, healing can take place inside of a person's heart if they'll respond to what God wants to do. What happens then? The person who's been adopted into God's family of course they're the ones who can go out and bless other people who are hurting.

There are a lot of hurting people in our world today. I know some of you are adopted into your home and you know exactly what I'm talking about because God's done a work in your heart. Those of you who have been adopted into God's family and you've seen healing take place in your heart, you know exactly what I'm talking about. We live in a world today where there are hurting people who are waiting for the blessing. Our God is gracious and He desires to give a blessing to so many people. There's so much brokenness in our world, there's so much sin in our world. So we have sin that isn't even caused by someone, but famine and war and poverty. And all these things are caused by other people. So people are broken. They're hurting, they're struggling, and they need the message that God has.

It's a message of blessing. You and I are the ones who have received that blessing. We have something to pass on. We are part of something really big. We're part of that blessing cycle. I encourage you to maximize that in your life. I'm not just talking about finances. I'm talking about your life. Dedicating your whole life to blessing other people because it's big. It's really big and God wants to bless so many people. Just so many people around you who need that message of who God is and what He wants to do in their lives as well.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, I pray for my little friend who's growing up in this new family, that you'd continue to heal her heart. Help her with her anger and her challenges that she's facing. I pray that you would heal her. I know there are people here who are struggling with things that they've carried around with for years. I know, Lord, you want to bless them. So I just pray you pour out your blessing in ways that are so amazing that they'll know it only came from you and your awesomeness and your power and your graciousness. Lord, we thank you that you are compassionate and gracious. And we thank you for allowing us to be part of the cycle, that you often pass on the blessings through us. So thank you for that privilege and we eagerly desire to be part of that gift to bless others as well. Use us, Father, as your church. I pray that you grow this church. Bless this church. Enable us to be a lighthouse in this community, to bless many people. I pray, Lord, that you would bless each one of us individually and help us to be able to pass on that message of your grace to many people. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.