

Giving Until it Hurts: Pain, Faith, and Purpose

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[00:00:20] **Grace:** Welcome to *Giving Done Right*, a podcast on everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette,

[00:00:26] **Phil:** and I'm Phil Buchanan.

[00:00:28] **Grace:** Phil, I'm really excited for our conversation today. It's with a major donor who is not a household name and is not a name that we're going to see in the newspapers, but someone who has a really interesting personal story and has really invested himself and in his family in a particular issue that they really care about.

[00:00:46] So today we're thrilled to have Jason Hackmann, philanthropist and president of the BryanMark group in St. Louis, join us. Jason founded the BryanMark group, which is a life insurance agency, and he's deeply invested in the issue of child slavery in Ghana. Over time, he's contributed more than a million dollars towards ending childhood slavery in Ghana, more specifically to an organization there called International Justice Mission.

[00:01:09] He mentions a book that was very pivotal for him in his journey to becoming a giver. It's called: *Jantsen's Gift: A True Story of Grief, Rescue, and Grace* by Pam Cope.

[00:01:20] **Phil:** Yeah, and it's so interesting, Grace, because he tells us a story of being on vacation, you know, in some fabulous place. And he hasn't really done much in the way of philanthropy up until that point in his life.

[00:01:32] He reads this book, connects with it, and actually connects it to the loss of his brother in a tragic accident when he was a teenager, as well as to his religious faith, which is really important because religious faith is a big part of the story of American philanthropy. And Jason is, is, you know, one example of the role that faith can play in giving, but also the role that kind of personal experience and tragedy can play in giving, and he talks about how all of that motivated him to really, really get very connected this issue of child slavery and Ghana.

[00:02:09] And to really give so much of himself to that effort. So, I'm really excited to get right into this interview with Jason Hackmann.

[00:02:17] Welcome, Jason Hackmann, to the *Giving Done Right* podcast. Thanks for joining us, Jason.

[00:02:22] **Jason:** Oh, thank you. Thanks for having me.

[00:02:24] **Phil:** Grace, I don't know if you recall this, but I was working on my book, *Giving Done Right*, and you had read a draft and you had a variety of critiques, all of which were very helpful, but one of the things you said is: "Phil, you don't have enough individual donor

voices in this book and you don't have enough people whose faith has played a significant role in their giving." And that was really important feedback because that is such a big part of the story of philanthropy.

[00:02:51] So, I got on the phone with Jason and just found him to be such an inspiring example. Jason, maybe you could just start by telling folks how did you become so involved in philanthropy? Tell us a little bit about what that journey looked like.

[00:03:04] **Jason:** You know, it all really started, if I kind of connect the dots because I think that's a kind of a key, at least in my experience, um, my brother was killed by a drunk driver in high school.

[00:03:13] So from that in 2008, my wife and I are on the Turks and Caicos and she hands me this book and I start reading it. And the first two chapters are essentially how this lady lost her son when he was 14, I believe, to a heart ailment, and essentially the pain of what she went through, whenever that happened.

[00:03:30] The reason I bring that up is without my brother's death, my heart, I don't think, would have been open to that story in the same manner. And the pain that I started to feel that she was going through, it kind of brought me back to the pain my family went through. I can read a thousand things and think maybe I should do something, but I never do.

[00:03:51] But that particular time, like my heart opened to it. And I thought, well, look at the power of one person, how it can change another person's life. And that was really the start that, wow, just if you help one person, just one, you did something.

[00:04:05] **Phil:** Can you say a little bit more about the connection you made between the loss of your brother? How old were you?

[00:04:13] **Jason:** I was 17 at the time and he was 19.

[00:04:16] **Phil:** This was many, many years later. You're a successful executive, running an insurance company, and yet you made that connection. Can you just say a little bit more about that?

[00:04:27] **Jason:** Yeah. I grew up in a small town of, I graduated 68 kids. There was maybe 15 of us that actually went to college. And without his death, I would have never graduated college and it transposed everything. I mean, I hadn't really left that small town. His death, looking back, if that wouldn't have happened. I would have never been used to help some of the people that I've helped.

[00:04:49] **Grace:** We know that one of your motivations in giving is through your faith, your Christian faith. As Phil mentioned for a lot of folks, and if you look at the statistics, faith motivated giving has been a big piece of the story of philanthropy in the United States and other places. So, curious what the role of faith is in your story?

[00:05:08] **Jason:** Maybe nontraditional. The piece of faith that was important in the very beginning, Grace that I guess I would share is my belief in giving out of just love to love another human being and to try to help them without anything in return. That comes from

faith that maybe not everybody would see. It's changed my life -- by just having no expectations, not wanting anything back and doing it out of the love and no other reason.

[00:05:32] The church has never played a big role for my part, as far as giving.

[00:05:36] **Grace:** You know, in your journey of giving, how do you make sure that what you're giving to is viewed as needed by those you're seeking to help? So, you had mentioned Ghana was not really on your radar. How did you decide to really focus on Ghana for your giving?

[00:05:53] **Jason:** Yeah, so it's changed over the years. So um not going into it with any expectations and just going through it with the experience. And taking that experience, making a decision and then taking a step from there instead of trying to figure it out in the very beginning, how it's going play out, just let it be.

[00:06:13] The important piece of Ghana was that I was able to get on the ground and experience the pain and see a six-year old kid sold into slavery. And I told myself I'd never forget that kid. I don't believe I was shown that problem to just walk away from it.

[00:06:29] **Grace:** And that identification that you describe I think is, is really powerful and often the seed of what catalyzes a lot of really meaningful giving and work.

[00:06:37] **Phil:** Like, just zooming out for people who may not know much about child slavery, what kind of progress has been made?

[00:06:44] **Jason:** It's the largest manmade lake in Ghana, Lake Volta. And the issue is, is fishermen will essentially be middle people that will go to the poor neighborhoods or villages in Ghana and they will make promises to their parents that they'll send them to school, but they're also gonna work, and we're gonna pay you literally like \$30 for your child.

[00:07:05] There would be a transfer of money and they would sell the rights to that kid. And these kids could be as young as four all the way up to 12 or 13. And they would take him up there and yeah, they would work from four in the morning. They would go lay these nets out. The kids would be the ones that was responsible for diving down and getting the nets out to collect the fish.

[00:07:26] Every kid will tell you a story of the kid who didn't know how to swim, that was forced to swim and is at the bottom of that lake. When you go out there, you just see kids and these fishermen everywhere. And I learned to be able to tell a slave child by their hair because their hair was brown because they were not hardly eating and have very little nutrients.

[00:07:47] And then when you went to the actual village of where they stayed, the slave kids were in a different... hut, if you want to call it? While the master's kids would actually maybe go to school, and we're fed well. These kids may be got one meal a day. Whether you were sick, whether you had pneumonia, malaria, you work 365, every day, 12-14 hours.

[00:08:08] There's a lot of NGOs that have done the rescue piece of it, but I'd never thought that would solve the problem just rescuing because they'll just get additional kids.

[00:08:16] **Grace:** Hmm.

[00:08:17] **Jason:** I probably spent a month a year for three years going over there. We started to see wow, to help those kids, that was very important.

[00:08:25] Cause you, you had the opportunity to change those kids' lives. How do you stop the bigger picture? I had actually spent time almost investing in a fish farm over there as an alternative source to how these fishermen on instead of using slave labor to actually create a fish farm in their own village to take care of their people.

[00:08:44] I was trying to think of the bigger picture, how do you solve this? So I ended up getting introduced to IJM, international justice mission, through another contact, kind of sharing with them the issue of slavery in Ghana. And we went over there on a trip and realized their model of enforcing the laws, cause if the laws are not enforced people will act in any which way, but if you can, actually enforce the laws that was written in Ghana's legal system and take it through court, and the fishermen knew there was repercussions, you can change the behavior of those individuals. And I came to the conclusion that was the only way you could actually maybe solve the problem.

[00:09:23] **Phil:** There's been a lot of critique of, I mean, just to put it really bluntly white American philanthropists, you know, coming in with their solutions to problems in Africa or in other parts of the world. And so do you ever get the reaction? Well, who are you Jason coming over to our country? How do you think about that?

[00:09:47] **Jason:** So, the first time we went over to Ghana and the organization we went with, the idea that we Americans know everything and that they need to be doing the way that we think they should be doing. And if they don't, we won't give and really not valuing them? Unfortunately, I saw it first hand, and I saw the arrogance of it and the ego part of this, and them not able to really relate to the culture and think well, in their culture, how does this really matter? I mean, I...I saw the white savior piece. On the other side, I'm going to tell you that someone that would use that as a reason, not to go help maybe, has never went to that Lake and stood across from a six-year old.

[00:10:33] And if you think that six-year old on that Lake or a lady in Congo who's been raped, if you think they care, if you're white, uh, that's crazy. That's not even relevant.

[00:10:44] **Grace:** If there are folks who are listening, who are worried, they're on the fence, they want to be more involved, but they want to be very careful of, you know, secondary effects that may come around because of their involvement or, you know, mixed motives or any number of things that an American helping out in these international contexts would bring. What would your advice be for them?

[00:11:07] **Jason:** This is the only thing I'd ever done up to that point in my life, going over to Ghana, that was not for me. It was purely for somebody else and I wanted nothing out of it other than just experiencing it and learning. And if you can truly go into whatever situation someone's thinking about, I believe under that context, you'll know the truth of why you're doing it.

[00:11:29] **Grace:** It strikes me that the listening and learning is so important.

[00:11:33] **Jason:** Yeah. And spending the time to get to know them and to really understand what the issues are. It's not just taking one trip or having one experience. It's opening yourself and being vulnerable. And that's how it becomes a non-issue. It may not work the first time. You may not have a great experience, but I still think you can learn from it.

[00:11:52] **Phil:** It's so interesting the way you talk, and I've heard you say this before, Jason, about pain and sort of the relationship between being able to sort of be hurt, to feel pain, and then to give. Is that part of what you've learned about yourself?

[00:12:09] **Jason:** If you're willing to experience that, I guess that's what will create the passion. It's easy to put that off -- what is happening over and whether it's Ghana, whether it's Sudan, or Congo or somewhere. And eventually it kind of goes out of sight out of mind and you don't feel it anymore. And I think then you lose the drive to make a difference.

[00:12:29] The more pain you feel, the less likely you are to ever forget that. And I don't ever want to forget the pain that I felt for those people because I'll end up forgetting them. And the more pain you can feel your pain ultimately is what leads you to something possibly great, or your failure leads to something good.

[00:12:51] **Phil:** What about the pain that is local in your community? In St. Louis, there's a lot of poverty. You've done very well as an entrepreneur with your business, you have resources. How do you think about that question of whether to give locally or halfway across the world?

[00:13:13] **Jason:** That's a good one. Cause I'll say my number, one thing that I get, if someone wants to say something to me is like, "why don't you give to people here?"

[00:13:21] Why do you, why are you given to there? I mean, there's people right here. Why is that?"

I didn't choose, I guess from the very beginning for Ghana to be the place that started, that my heart was drawn to. It just happened. And that's where my passion is over in Africa. And while there's needs here, the experiences I've had over there...I have no like issues giving whatever I give to these places because of really the atrocities and the things that I've seen over there is not even in comparison to anything here almost. Now, it's hard to relate that to someone, but that's true. There's a few places here I support, but I think everyone's called to a different thing, and it's just about really helping. Whether that's here or there, that doesn't matter as much as just helping another person.

[00:14:08] **Grace:** Jason, I wanted to turn to sort of the idea of how much donors should think about giving. And I'm curious, how do you decide how much to give? And do you have any advice for donors who are trying to choose the right threshold?

[00:14:23] I think there's this question in folks' mind about how much is enough, and I know you have a unique perspective on this, so we'd love to hear your thoughts on that.

[00:14:31] **Jason:** Now this is maybe from a faith point of view, uh, Grace, so I'll just start with this one thing. So some people will talk about tithing and the 10% -- I've never looked at that actually. I think from a faith point of view of "we're called to give sacrificially." And that's probably a lot more than 10%. Maybe it could be less, but you're sacrificing. So how much to give? You give as much as what your heart calls you to give. And that's maybe not like a percentage answer, but in my experience, that's very real.

[00:15:05] What I've tried to do is watch how much I give, how much I have an obligation to annually that I have to give, that people depend on me compared to larger gifts in order to yeah, you know, it's a one and done with that organization for a period of time. You know, a couple hundred kids, let's say I'm providing school for in Congo. I can not let them down and to make sure I can do that. And I'm not overstretched.

[00:15:30] **Grace:** Can I follow up? If there was a fellow entrepreneur who was of means who currently is giving let's say a few hundred dollars a year to a cause that they care about, and it has the capacity to give more. You obviously have given quite sacrificially in many ways. You and I have had conversations as well about giving to that point where it actually starts to really affect lifestyle and savings down the road.

[00:15:56] **Jason:** Yeah.

[00:15:56] **Grace:** How would you challenge someone? Cause if they're following their heart, maybe their hearts, like "50 bucks is all I have this year" and I have other obligations. What would you say to them?

[00:16:06] **Jason:** I would say under that context, I don't think what they're giving to is probably really where their heart's at. And if they're willing to open up their heart, it will find them. They're only giving 50 bucks a month because they don't feel that passionately about it. That's the truth. If they really felt passionately, then, it's not a question.

[00:16:25] **Grace:** Yes. It's like that ancient saying where your treasure is there. Your heart will be also.

[00:16:30] **Jason:** Yeah, it all comes down to passion and not really, I can't afford to. And if you can't really afford to, there are ways to still help another individual and show the value of a human being that that other person has that doesn't involve a dollar amount. So that's the other piece, you don't have to have money.

[00:16:50] You can go love another person and show the value that they have.

[00:16:54] **Grace:** Thank you, Jason. That's really helpful. And to close out each of our episodes, we'd like to ask our guests a question: giving done right to you is about...fill in the blank. How would you answer that?

[00:17:08] **Jason:** Doing it authentically for them. Out of love and not expecting or wanting to receive anything back.

[00:17:19] **Grace:** Thank you so much, Jason. We've really enjoyed having you.

[00:17:22] **Jason:** You're welcome. And thanks for having me.

[00:17:23] **Phil:** Thank you, Jason.

[00:17:24] **Jason:** Thank you, Phil.

[00:17:32] **Grace:** So Phil, I'm curious what you thought of our conversation with Jason.

[00:17:36] **Phil:** I just think Jason is so, so inspiring and the way that he talks about the connection between a tragic loss of a family member, sort of out of the blue, which is something I like a lot of people can relate to because I've been there, how he connects that to this purpose and just desire to do good.

[00:17:57] And that was very, very powerful to me. But, but also that it isn't just about, you know, writing checks. He really gets proximate -- to use Bryan Stevenson's term -- in ways that have changed who he is because of the pain that he's opened himself up to and, and the, just the explicit connection he makes between that pain and giving and really living I thought was very powerful.

[00:18:24] **Grace:** Yeah. It reminds me of the conversation we've had in the last episode about sometimes the tension that people see about giving with their heart versus with their head. And I think he's a really interesting example of doing both. I mean, really his whole journey of giving with the heart began with tragedy, but also in seeing and experiencing what the situation is on the ground. It strikes me that he did a lot of listening and understanding of the situation there. I really liked your question about the white savior complex cause I think that's something that we all think about is -- sometimes we're afraid to really jump in and get involved because you know, who are we as Americans to go different places and kind of insert ourselves? But I really thought his, his answer was really powerful.

[00:19:10] **Phil:** Yeah. And just his description of, of the horrors of slavery, right?

[00:19:15] **Grace:** Yeah. I mean, I couldn't help, but think when he described, you know, the picture of a child being torn away from, you know, his or her family that, in the United States, like that was the reason, reality for so many...so for so many people here because of the legacy of slavery in the United States and, um, and how, you know, those impacts are still affecting us today. And, I know we're going to address this in future episodes, but certainly there are also people who are very committed to eradicating racial inequality, um, with their giving much in the same way that Jason is really focused on child slavery as an issue.

[00:19:55] **Phil:** Yeah, and it just kind of raises the question, like his discussion about having to move into the pain in a domestic context, you know, quite separate from his philanthropy. It does raise questions for me about, you know, our just sort of societal denial of some of the pain of our own American history.

[00:20:16] So, there's just so many places you can go with the conversation that we just had with Jason. And I really just appreciated his openness and honesty with us and his

willingness to talk again about his faith, which is something that's such a big part of the philanthropic story for so many donors. And, and I know it is for you, Grace.

[00:20:35] **Grace:** I thought that was really interesting. You know, like you had mentioned in our intro about how religious giving has always been a pretty big proportion of giving in the U.S. I mean, Jason is interesting in that as he shared, he doesn't actually give a large proportion to his church, which is I think a more common practice, you know, he's really picked the areas that his family really cares about.

[00:20:55] I mean, I think for me, faith is a really big part of my motivations in giving and you know, his mention of the tithe, I think that, you know, as I've been taught that the 10% is really like a floor of giving and, you know, Jason mentioned giving until it hurts. And I think that's something that my faith has also taught me about. And even if you don't share the same faith belief that there are still things that we can be really inspired about and deeply understand from someone else's experiences.

[00:21:24] **Phil:** Yeah. And so, as we wrap up here, Grace, I would just say like, and you and I over the years have had many conversations about this, I am not a religious person. And yet there's so much that resonates for me in the conversations with you about your faith and what it means to you and also in this conversation with Jason.

[00:21:44] **Grace:** So Phil, where can people go for more information about effective giving?

[00:21:48] **Phil:** Well, there's a ton of resources out there. You can start with cep.org.

[00:21:53] **Grace:** I also want to plug Phil's book, which came out last year, called *Giving Done Right*. Our podcast is named after that book. If you haven't had a chance to check it out, Jason's story is in there and so many more really great tips on good giving.

[00:22:05] **Phil:** Yeah. Thanks for that, Grace. And you can find us on Twitter. You're at @graceNicolette, one "L" two "t"s. I'm at @PhilxBuchanan. You can send us a note if you want, with any suggestions or comments, we'd love to hear you just by email -- GDR podcast, G D R podcast@cep.org.

[00:22:26] **Grace:** And if you liked the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. It really helps.

[00:22:30] **Phil:** And thanks again, obviously to Jason Hackmann for joining us.

[00:22:33] Thanks to the amazing CEP podcast team: producer, Sarah Martin, research and logistics guru -- that's an official title! -- Molly Heidemann, and our colleagues, Ethan McCoy, Jay Kustka, and Sae Darling, who have helped out as well.