

“GRACE-BASED GIVING” **(2 Corinthians 8:1-11)**

As we continue our study of 2 Corinthians today, we come to a topic that pastors generally don't like to talk about, and that is giving financially to the Lord's work. The reason it's a bit uncomfortable is because we don't want to give off the impression that all the church cares about is money. I remember well the first time I talked about financial giving here at church. The only time I really talk about it is when it comes up in going verse-by-verse through a book, and it happened to come up this particular Sunday. A few weeks after giving this sermon I stopped by to see a neighbor up the street who had come to church that Sunday, and caught him working outside. You can kind of read people's body language and I could tell he was a little distant and uncomfortable.

As I was getting ready to leave, he said, “Can I be honest with you?” Um, sure. “One of the reasons I never go to church is because all they talk about is money, and sure enough, when we came a few weeks ago you talked about money, and I decided right then and there that I wouldn't go back.” I thanked him for his honesty and said, “That's actually the first sermon I've ever preached on giving and I guess you had the good fortune of being there that particular day.” He said, “Really? You don't talk about it every week?” I said, “I don't pick out the sermon topic – I just go verse-by-verse through books of the Bible and the passage we're in that morning picks out the topic.” Really? That's how you do it?” We talked for a while longer and as I was leaving, he said, “We'll see you Sunday.” He and his wife became active members of the church for several years before moving away.

If this is your first Sunday in church – welcome. We're going to talk about financial giving, not just this Sunday, but for the next three Sundays, and that's because it's the topic in our verse-by-verse study of 2 Corinthians. I have long since gotten over feeling uncomfortable talking about giving because if the Bible talks about it – and it talks about it a lot – it must be something pretty important to God and our walk with Him. Jesus actually talked more about our relationship to money and possessions than any other subject, and He pinpointed the importance of giving when He said, “Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also... if your heart beats for me, your money and possessions will naturally follow.” As we will see, giving in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is portrayed not as something burdensome and done out of guilt, but when understood correctly is a privilege and a blessing and something that brings great joy.

Before we get into our text today, it's helpful to understand the background that leads up to it. The Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter to the Corinthian church in Greece, was a devout Jew who was dramatically saved as he was on his way to persecute Christians. At the moment of his conversion, God said, “I'm choosing you to be my apostle to the Gentiles – I want you to take the gospel beyond the culture and heritage of the Jews to the non-Jewish people in the west.” Christianity flows out of the Jewish faith, and the headquarters of the early church was in Jerusalem, where the church began on the Day of Pentecost. Jerusalem was the mother church that sent missionaries out to Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world – it was the church where everything began.

As the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem it created some cultural tension. The Jewish believers back in Jerusalem believed that Gentiles – in order to be Christians – needed to keep the Old Testament Jewish laws such as being circumcised, eating certain foods, and keeping the Sabbath. Paul was committed to building bridges between Jews and Gentiles – encouraging Jewish believers to not burden Gentile believers with the yoke of the law, and encouraging Gentile believers to honor their fellow Jewish believers through whom their faith came.

Some years later, while Paul was spreading the gospel out west, the Jewish believers back in Jerusalem fell on hard times. The combination of a severe famine and relentless persecution left them ostracized from society and destitute. We know in the book of Acts that the church in Jerusalem freely shared what they had with each other, but that system was no longer working because there was nothing left to share. Paul saw this as a wonderful opportunity for the Gentile churches to show their love and gratitude to the Jews by taking up a financial offering and sending it back to the church in Jerusalem. This offering was a big thing to Paul. He never asked money for himself, but he wanted to bless and honor the first believers back in Jerusalem that he originally persecuted.

A year before Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, the church in Corinth said, “We want to take part in this offering,” but they never got around to doing it. As we’ve been talking about for a number of weeks, a rift had developed between Paul and the Corinthians that was resolved when Titus took a letter on behalf of Paul to the church in Corinth. His letter softened them, they repented for their disrespect and disloyalty to Paul, and reaffirmed their love for him. Now that their relationship has been restored, in chapters 8-9 Paul brings up the subject of the collection they had neglected.

Today we’re going to look at the first 11 verses of chapter 8 where Paul gives two examples of giving he wants the Corinthians to follow, and each example is followed by an exhortation to complete the collection they had pledged to take part in. The first example is found in verses 1-5... “And now, brothers and sisters, 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. For I testify that 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. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.”

Macedonia was a region in northern Greece, about 300 miles north of Corinth. On his second missionary journey Paul started churches in three Macedonian cities – Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. When these churches heard about the desperate need of the believers in Jerusalem, they couldn’t wait to give – and 2000 years later they continue to serve as model of giving in four ways.

First, the Macedonian churches show us that **giving flows from grace**. The word “grace” is mentioned several times in these two chapters, and it’s grace that sets Christian giving apart from all other forms of giving. Grace is receiving a kindness and mercy that I don’t deserve. If you take out a loan and don’t pay it back on time, you face a penalty – but sometimes the bank or credit card company will extend a grace period where they don’t charge you interest or late fees for non-payment – you don’t deserve it, but it’s an act of grace on their part. On a much, much bigger scale, you and I owe a debt to God for our sin – a debt we can never repay – we can’t work it off, we can’t be better people, we can’t go to church often enough – we simply receive God’s grace.

Giving in the Bible is never presented as something we do grudgingly or out of guilt – we do it because of the grace God has shown to us in saving us, forgiving us, adopting us, and blessing us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. Chapter 9 ends by saying, “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” Our salvation is given to us freely by God’s grace and not something we deserve. Once we experience God’s gift of grace, it creates in us a desire to give our all for Him – not to win His favor, but because of His favor – we do it out of love and gratitude for all He’s done for us.

When someone has helped you in a time of need, there's a natural impulse to give back – generosity breeds generosity. When we understand and experience the overwhelming grace God has shown to us, we delight in giving back to Him. In chapter 9 it says that God loves a “cheerful giver,” one who gives not reluctantly or out of guilt or pressure, but one whose heart overflows with grace.

Next, we see that **giving is not dependent on favorable conditions**. Verse 2 says, “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” It would be one thing to ask a wealthy, prosperous church to give to help those in poverty, but the Macedonian believers themselves were experiencing severe affliction and extreme poverty. We're not told any details, but we can assume that like many Christians in the early church, they were being persecuted for their faith which affected their ability to earn a living and led to financial hardship.

But this hardship did not keep them from giving. Verse 4 seems to indicate that Paul did not even ask them to give to the collection, but when they heard about the need they begged to be a part of the relief effort... “We want to help... where's the offering basket... we want to give.” Most of us can point to times in life when things were tight financially – some of you might be there right now – and like the Macedonians, you don't have much to give. The temptation is to say, “I'll give when... when I get out of school... when I pay off my loan and debts... when the kids are out of school... when I save enough up for retirement.” But the Macedonians teach us that your economic condition doesn't have to keep you from giving.

And this leads us to the third mark they modeled: **giving is not a matter of amount, but attitude**. The Macedonians did not have much to give dollar-wise – but they gave. God is looking not so much as how much we give, but sacrificial attitude with which we give. The premiere example of this is the poor widow in Mark 12. As Jesus was observing people putting their offering into the temple treasury, He saw several rich people drop in large amounts, making sure that everyone could see how generous they were – and then he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins that barely amounted to a penny. It was the widow's giving that caught Jesus' attention. Mark 12:43-44 says, “Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.’”

Jeff Bezos, who started Amazon, is worth 163 billion dollars – that was as of yesterday – he might be worth a few billion more today. If he were to, say, make a donation of 100 billion dollars to some charity, it would make the headlines of every news outlet and be seen as one of the most generous gifts in history. But in Jesus' eyes his gift would be seen as almost scrooge-like because he still would have 63 billion left to live on, while the widow gave all she had.

Paul will talk later in verse 11 about giving “according to your means.” God wants us to give generously, but in a way that is in keeping with what He's given us. He also talked about his first letter to the Corinthians. He said, “On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income” (1 Corinthians 16:2). Paul says, “Each of you – not just the wealthy folks, but each of you – should make a plan to give and set aside an amount in keeping with your income to put in the church offering each Sunday.

If God has blessed you with good health and a good job and you make good money, then give much. If you're having a rough go of it financially and are barely getting by, then give less. The important thing is that you develop a pattern of giving. When you're young and poor, you may not have much to give, but get in the habit of giving something. If you've had a financial setback, you may not be in a position to give much, but you still want to be in the habit of giving something just as the poor widow did.

A principle we will learn in chapter 9 is, as you develop a pattern of giving, God will increase your ability to give. Paul writes... "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." Giving is not about the amount you give, but the attitude in which you give it – God loves cheerful, joyful givers – who give not out of guilt or pressure, but out of the sheer delight of giving that flows from God's grace.

The fourth principle of giving the Macedonians model is that giving begins by giving yourself to the Lord. Verse 5 says, "They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us." Giving begins with the fundamental understanding that my life is not my own, and therefore my possessions are not my own. Everything I have is on loan to me from God. It's easy to surrender part of my possessions to God when I've already surrendered my whole life to God.

You might recall the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and said, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus knew that if he was not willing to let go of his possessions, he would not be able to receive the free gift of salvation that Jesus offered, so he said, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor." The rich young ruler walked away very sad because he was not willing to surrender his possessions to the Lord.

Once we see that everything we have already belongs to the Lord, giving is easy. It's all His anyway – I am simply a steward of what He's given me. In the parable of the talents Jesus entrusts each of His servants with a certain amount of gifts and possessions – some are entrusted with much, some with less – but each is responsible to use and invest what He's given them in His kingdom, and one day Jesus will return to hold each servant accountable for what they've done with what they've been given. Once you give your life first to the Lord, you will naturally want to use what you have to build His kingdom and bring glory to Him.

In verse 6 Paul calls on the Corinthians to follow the example of the Macedonians... "So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part." When Titus went to Corinth to deliver Paul's letter, he encouraged the church to finish collecting an offering for the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. They said they would, but they hadn't gotten around to it, and Paul wanted to rekindle a spirit of generosity in the church body. He doesn't scold them, but he does give them a nudge... "You began well – you gave enthusiastically – now you need to finish the job and Titus is going to help you get it done."

In verse 7 he says... "But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving." Paul says, "You do so well in so many things – you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're enthusiastic, you love us – now do your best in the area of giving." This was an area they neglected.

One of the reasons I don't talk much about giving – except when it comes up in the flow of a passage – is because we have a very giving church. Each year we are amazed and grateful for how God provides all our needs and beyond. Our church has always been a very generous church – whether weekly or monthly tithing, or giving camp scholarships to the youth, or taking a collection for the Gideons, or filling Christmas shoeboxes – this church has always been generous – and it's an area we should continue to excel in.

I've always been taught that giving is a barometer of spirituality because Jesus said that what we do with our treasure reveals what's in our heart... “Show me your checkbook, your VISA statements, and your receipts, and I'll show you where your heart is.” If you choose to store up treasures on earth, your heart will be focused on things of the earth – but if you choose to store up treasures in heaven, your heart will be focused on God and building His kingdom. When we give, we signal where our hearts truly are.

In verse 8 Paul does not want to give the impression that he's putting pressure on the Corinthians and twisting their arms to give. He says, “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.” “I'm not commanding you to give – I don't want you to give reluctantly or grudgingly – but as your spiritual father I want to stir within you the desire to give by using the Macedonians as inspiration.”

We need models in our Christian life, and I can think of many people over the years who have modeled generosity. I think of my parents and grandparents, who taught me to tithe – and we'll talk more about next week. I remember my dad giving me money for mowing the yard – it wasn't much back then – maybe \$5 bucks – and he encouraged me put 50 cents in the offering plate at church – or 10% of what I made. It was a little hard as a kid to part with 50 cents and I'm not sure I was a cheerful giver, but it developed in me the habit – as it says in 1 Corinthians 16 – of setting aside a sum in keeping with my income and giving it to the Lord on Sunday – and because of my dad's modeling, it's a pattern I have continued to this day.

Paul says, “I'm not commanding you to give, but I am urging you to complete the collection pledge to take part in.” This leads Paul in verse 9 to give a second example of generous giving – the supreme example of all... “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.” Once we are saved by God's grace, the goal of the Christian life is to become more and more like Christ each day, and one of the ways we imitate Christ is by giving. He is the supreme model of generosity.

As God and creator of the universe, Jesus possessed everything – all power, authority, sovereignty, glory, honor, and majesty in heaven. Yet He emptied Himself of His heavenly rights and privileges when He came to earth to be human like us – and not just a human, but a humble servant. He didn't come as a king or prince, but as a tiny baby – He wasn't born in a palace, but in a lowly stable filled with animals. One writer says, “He had to borrow a place to be born, a boat to preach from, a place to sleep, a donkey to ride upon, an upper room to use for the last supper, and a tomb in which to be buried. By the time our Savior endured the tortures of the cross for us, His earthly possessions amounted to no more than the clothes on His back that were divided up by the soldiers who crucified Him.”

Jesus did all this for our sake – so that through His poverty we might become rich. This, of course, is not talking about being materially rich, but being spiritually rich. It implies that before Christ came to earth, we were spiritually poor – not just poor, but destitute. In our fallen sinful condition there was nothing we could do, nothing we could say, and nothing we could give to God to be reconciled with Him.

But now that we have trusted in Christ for salvation, we are adopted into God's family – we become His children – and all that Christ has is now ours. Romans 8:17a says, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." Do you remember the movie *Annie*? Annie is the orphan girl whose life suddenly changes when she's taken from her orphanage to live with a billionaire Oliver Warbucks and his wife. Annie goes from living under a mean, spiteful, orphanage caretaker to a father-figure who love and cares for her – she goes from having no possessions to having everything – and after being adopted by the Warbucks, everything in her hard-luck life turns sunny and bright.

In an even more dramatic way, because of Christ, we go from poverty to riches – from having nothing to being co-heirs with Him. The point Paul makes is that even if you don't have much in the way of money or possessions, because you have been saved and adopted into God's family, you are spiritually rich beyond measure – you are a new creation in Christ – you have abundant and eternal life – you have every spiritual blessing in Christ – you have love and joy and peace – you have purpose and meaning – and you have hope for the future. And since you've been given so much, give generously and freely in return. It's all about the heart.

After giving this second example of generosity, Paul once again urges the Corinthians to complete their collection for the saints in Jerusalem. In verses 10-11 he says... "And here is my judgment 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. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means."

Paul says, "You guys were the first ones moved in your spirit to give to this collection, now finish it – you showed willingness a year ago to give, now match that willingness with completion." Good intentions to give are good – willingness to give is good – but it must be matched by actually giving. Listen again to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:2... "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up." The idea here is that giving is not something done haphazardly or on the fly, but is something that should be planned – it should be thought out ahead of time – it should be set aside and saved up. That speaks of intentionality and planning.

The important thing is to start giving. If all you make is \$5 bucks mowing a yard, plan to give part of that back to the Lord. Don't give it out of guilt or pressure – give it cheerfully from a heart overflowing with His grace. God doesn't need our money – He owns the cattle on a thousand hills – what He wants is our heart – a heart grateful for all that He has given us.

This brings us to the Lord's Table which reminds us of the grace and generosity of God sending His only begotten Son to die in our place. Jesus, who was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that we through His poverty might become rich.