

The Book of 2 Corinthians

Lesson 8: The Grace of Giving -- 2 Corinthians 8:1-24

Paul wants to talk about money, but he never once calls it that. He calls it grace. Over and over in these two chapters the same word keeps surfacing, the word for grace, the same word used for the saving gift of God in Christ. When Paul writes to encourage a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem, he does not frame it as a fundraising drive or a religious tax. He frames it as a grace, a privilege, an overflow of the grace God has already poured into His people. Christian giving, in Paul's hands, is not a burden laid on us but a beauty produced in us.

To make the point, Paul holds up an unlikely example: the churches of Macedonia. These were not wealthy congregations. They were poor, and on top of their poverty they were enduring "a severe test of affliction." By every earthly calculation they should have been on the receiving end of charity. Instead, Paul says, "their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity." They gave "beyond their means," and not grudgingly. They actually begged Paul "earnestly for the favor of taking part" in the offering. And the secret of it all, Paul says, is that "they gave themselves first to the Lord." Their generosity was not the root; it was the fruit. Once they had given themselves to God, giving their possessions was no great leap.

That is the heart of this chapter. Generosity is a grace to be grown, not a law to be enforced. Paul tells the Corinthians, who excelled in faith, speech, knowledge, and love, to "excel in this act of grace also." He is careful to say, "I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine." He will not coerce their giving, because coerced giving is not the grace he is after. He wants a generosity that flows freely from a heart captured by Christ.

And then he gives the deepest reason of all, the gospel itself: "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 by his poverty might become rich." There is the model and the motive. The Son of God emptied Himself, traded the riches of heaven for the poverty of a manger and a cross, so that we, the truly poor, might be made rich beyond measure. Christians give because we have been given to, lavishly, sacrificially, eternally. Read this chapter and let the grace of the giving Christ reshape the way you hold everything you have.

Group Discussion: Paul holds up the Macedonian churches, who out of "extreme poverty" and "a severe test of affliction" still "overflowed in a wealth of generosity," having first "given themselves to the Lord" (vv. 1-5). What does it reveal that their generosity flowed not from wealth but from joy and self-surrender? Why do we so often assume that generosity is mainly a matter of how much we have, and how does this passage challenge that assumption?

Personal Reflection: Paul says the Macedonians “gave themselves first to the Lord,” and that giving their possessions followed naturally (v. 5). When you examine your own giving, of money, time, and yourself, does it flow from a heart that has first surrendered to God, or does it tend to be reluctant, calculated, or kept at arm’s length? What would change if you gave yourself first to the Lord?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–24

Study Questions

1. Paul describes how the Macedonian churches, in deep poverty and affliction, “overflowed in a wealth of generosity,” because “they gave themselves first to the Lord” (vv. 1–5). What does this teach about the true source of Christian generosity, and why does Paul say their self-surrender to God came before, and produced, their generosity with possessions?
2. Examine your own giving honestly. Does it tend to overflow from joy and surrender, or does it feel like a reluctant duty squeezed out under pressure? What does your giving reveal about the condition of your heart toward God right now?
3. Paul urges the Corinthians, who excel in faith, speech, knowledge, and love, to “excel in this act of grace also” (v. 7). What does it mean that generosity is a grace to be grown and excelled in, like faith or love, rather than a fixed obligation to be merely satisfied?
4. In what areas of the Christian life do you see yourself growing, and is generosity one of them? What would it look like to deliberately “excel” in giving this year, to grow in it on purpose rather than leaving it static?
5. Paul says he gives this counsel “not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine” (v. 8). What does this teach about the connection between generosity and genuine love, and why does Paul refuse to simply command their giving?
6. If someone examined how you actually spend your money and time, what would they conclude about what you love most? Where is there a gap between what you say you value and what your giving reveals you value?
7. Paul urges the Corinthians to “finish doing it,” matching their earlier readiness with completion, “according to what a person has” (vv. 10–12). What does this teach about following through on good intentions and about giving in proportion to what we actually have, rather than what we do not?
8. Is there a good intention to give or to serve that you began with enthusiasm but never completed? What has kept you from finishing, and what would it take to follow through?
9. Paul anchors the whole appeal in the gospel: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (v. 9). How does the self-giving of Christ serve as both the motive and the model for Christian generosity, and how does New Testament giving, as a free-will, purposed, cheerful grace, differ both from Old Testament tithing imposed as binding law and from the prosperity teaching that treats giving as a way to get rich?

10. Look back across the whole chapter, the generous poor, the grace to be grown, the test of genuine love, the completed intention, the self-improverishing Christ. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this passage, and what is your first step toward that change this week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Luke 21:1-4, the widow who gave more than all the rich out of her poverty; Acts 4:32-35, believers sharing so that no one among them was in need; 1 Timothy 6:17-19, the rich commanded to be generous and ready to share; Proverbs 11:24-25, the generous person who is enriched while the hoarder comes to want; Philippians 4:15-19, partnership in giving and God who supplies every need