THIS GRACE OF GIVING

2 Corinthians 8:1–15

Key Verse: 8:9

“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.”

What motivates you to give? We’re familiar with the warning that gifts often have strings attached, meaning the giver expects something in return. Some give because they’re aware of others’ great need or suffering, or out of a sense of duty or honor, or even guilt or fear. But in today’s passage Paul describes how genuine Christian giving is actually a response to God’s grace to us. The best motivation to give is out of an awareness of God’s grace. It reminds us of our Lord Jesus’ own words, “But whoever has been forgiven little loves little” (Lk7:47b), or, in other words, “gives little.” In this passage we want to learn both how we should give and why we should give. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words.

In the previous chapter Paul wrote about how the Corinthians had experienced godly sorrow (7:10). It had led them to realize how wrong they’d been in harboring even slight criticisms of Paul and to begin to change their attitude. It meant their relationship with Paul was on the way to being restored. With this in mind, in chapters 8 and 9 Paul goes on to write about an important subject he had in his heart. Paul was in the process of raising an offering from the Gentile churches and taking it to the Jewish church in Jerusalem. This international offering is mentioned in Acts, in Romans and in 1 & 2 Corinthians. Participating in this offering was more than helping with a financial need; it would express appreciation, love and spiritual unity among all God’s people. Paul had a sense of problem about potential division in the worldwide church due to racial and cultural differences, and he was taking practical steps to prevent it. It’s unique in the Bible to find two whole chapters about church offering, and we learn so much here. These chapters have three main sections: 8:1–15 emphasizes the need for generosity; 8:16–9:5 explains why Titus and his team would be coming to help them prepare their offering; 9:6–15 describes how God blesses those who give and what impact such giving has.

The main theme of the first section can be found in the expression “this grace of giving” (8:7b). In chapters 8 and 9 the word “grace” is repeated five times in English, and in Greek it’s actually repeated ten times (8:1,4,6,7,9,16,19; 9:8,14,15). It’s the Greek word “karis,” and in these chapters it’s also translated as “privilege,” “act,” “offering” and “thanks.” Paul’s point in using this word so often is to emphasize that Christian giving should be motivated by God’s grace. It’s what makes our giving healthy.

Still it can sound abstract. So in verses 1–5 Paul begins by mentioning a concrete example. Read verse 1. Paul says God gave his grace to these Macedonian churches. At that time Macedonia was a Roman province on the Greek peninsula. In northern Macedonia were the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, and in the south, Athens. On his second missionary journey God led Paul to these places to plant churches. When Paul says God gave his grace to these Macedonian churches, it means, in one sense, that God helped them believe in Jesus and become brothers and sisters in Christ.

But it meant more than that. Read verse 2. We’re not exactly sure what their “very severe trial” was, but in light of what we see in Acts 16–17, these churches experienced intense persecution for their newfound faith in Jesus. Jews who opposed Paul followed him to these places and stirred up misunderstanding and trouble, and believers could be beaten and thrown in jail, or worse. Paul also says they experienced “extreme poverty,” or literally, poverty in the pits. Because they became Christians, they may have had all their property confiscated (cf. Heb10:24). But despite all they were going through, Paul says that, surprisingly, they had “overflowing joy” and “rich generosity.”

What did Paul mean by this? In another letter he writes that the Macedonian church of Philippi was the first one to share with him in the matter of giving (Php4:15,16). Later in this letter he mentions that when he first lived in Corinth and was getting their church started, it was the Macedonian churches that were supporting him financially (11:9). The church in Philippi began through a businesswoman named Lydia, who became a very generous supporter of Paul. To this joyful church Paul wrote Philippians, which is known as the epistle of joy. It’s so ironic but true that taking makes us dissatisfied but giving makes us joyful. But giving and being joyful in the midst of suffering can happen only because of God’s grace. Today, too, God’s grace makes us joyful and generous no matter what our circumstances.

Paul goes on to describe even more the unusual nature of their giving. Read verses 3–5. We see four aspects here. First, they gave “beyond their ability,” which means they gave to the point that it actually hurt them personally. It reminds us of what Jesus said about the poor widow who put into the temple treasury box two very small copper coins and was giving all she had to live on (Mt12:41–44). Second, they also gave “entirely on their own,” meaning no one was asking or pushing; their giving came from their own initiative. Third, they were pleading with Paul to join in this special offering. They considered it a “privilege” and a chance to have real fellowship with God’s suffering people. Through their own suffering they could really understand God’s suffering people in Jerusalem (1Th2:14). Fourth, they were giving not just to people, but first of all to the Lord. It means it wasn’t just human loyalty but actually an act of worshiping God. These four aspects put together are clear evidence that they were truly motivated by God’s grace. When money is involved, people’s way of thinking can become strange. But God’s grace makes us give even beyond our ability. God’s grace helps us take the initiative in giving. God’s grace makes us consider it a privilege to share in others’ suffering through our giving. God’s grace helps us see giving actually as an act of worship of God. In brief, God’s grace makes our thinking about giving very healthy.

Look at verse 6. Evidently on one of his former visits Titus himself had encouraged the Corinthians to participate in this special offering. In 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 Paul had already written to them to start preparing this offering in advance. But due to the troubling events afterwards, they seemed to have stopped. So now Paul was encouraging them to “bring to completion this act of grace on your part.” He again emphasizes here that their offering needs to be “an act of grace”—not something forced or only a duty. And he emphasizes that they need to finish it. He develops this idea further. Read verses 10,11. We learn here that actually it was the Corinthians who were the first ones to volunteer to join in the special offering for the Jerusalem church. In 9:2 we learn that their eagerness and enthusiasm to give was what actually inspired the Macedonians to also beg to join in this offering. We also learn something important in verses 10,11. We can be willing to offer at first, and then, fizzle out. It’s our human nature. But giving can’t just be impulsive, or done rarely, every once in a while; it needs to be consistent. So we all need God’s grace in our hearts constantly, which enables us to keep our offering commitments in a healthy way and follow through with them to the end.

Read verse 7. The Corinthians had a troubled church, but Paul says they were actually excellent people in many ways. They excelled in faith to ask for miracles, in their speech, in their knowledge, and in their complete earnestness. They were very proud of themselves about these things. Paul mentions he also had kindled God’s love in them. But just as they valued these things so highly, they also needed to pursue excellence in giving. It tells us all that giving is a very important part of Christian life and discipleship. Even if we believe and know many things and can speak very well about them, if we don’t learn how to give, we’re missing something very important. People may share many brilliant ideas, but when it comes time to give, they often seem to disappear. So we have the expression, “Put your money where your mouth is.” May God newly inspire us to pursue personal excellence in giving.

To motivate them further, Paul says he’s not commanding them but testing the sincerity of their love by comparing it with the earnestness of others—in this case, with that of the believers in Macedonia (8). Sometimes we need to hear what other Christians are doing so that we also can get inspired. Then Paul goes on to the supreme example. Read verse 9. Paul says this is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He says “you know” it. In fact, every true believer knows it. What is his grace? His grace is his forgiveness and salvation. Jesus gives us his grace freely and willingly, even though we’re incorrigible sinners and really don’t deserve it. Though we were dead in our transgressions and sins, he showered his one-sided grace on us and made us alive with Christ (Eph2:1–5). He gives us his grace not just at our conversion, but constantly in our lives. Just like these Corinthians, even as Christians we can fight and quarrel and covet, love the world and basically be acting like enemies of God. But Jesus still gives us more grace (Jas4:1–6). Even when we’re suffering unbearably and begging God to take it away from us, Jesus keeps giving us his grace (2Co12:9).

Paul emphasizes in verse 9 that Jesus gives us his grace without holding anything back. He says he was rich but became poor for our sakes. Rich people usually don’t want to become poor. Poor people usually don’t want to remain poor. So what does Paul really mean? All throughout his earthly life the Bible tells us that Jesus was actually poor—so poor that at his birth he was laid in a manger, during his ministry he had no place even to lay his head, and at the end of his life, he died on a cross. But he was rich in the sense that he came from heaven. He shared glory with the Father before the world began (Jn17:5). He’s God the Son, the Creator of all things, the source of all life, the one worthy of all worship (Jn1:1–4; Mt2:11; 14:33; 28:9; Jn9:38; 20:28; Col1:16). But he became poor when he became flesh, taking on our human limitations, and made his dwelling among us (Jn1:14). He shared our humanity, he knew hunger and thirst and tiredness, and he experienced all our sufferings, sorrows and temptations (Heb2:14; 4:15; Isa53:3). He became poor when he made himself nothing and became our servant, and ultimately, when he died for us on the cross (Php2:6–8). It may sound like a cliché. But to give us his grace, Jesus gave us his all, his everything, even shedding all his own blood, pouring out his very life, holding nothing back. We need to really know and appreciate how great his grace is.

Paul also says in verse 9 that through his poverty we become rich. What does he mean? He certainly doesn’t mean rich financially. He means rich spiritually. What does it mean that Jesus makes us spiritually rich? It means he enriches us with every spiritual blessing (Eph1:3). He fills us with the Holy Spirit as a deposit for the glories of heaven (1:22). He reconciles us to God and gives us the privilege of helping others do so also (5:18,19). He enables us to be like himself, poor yet making others rich, having nothing yet possessing everything (6:10). Real richness is never about money in the bank or material possessions; it’s a state of mind and heart. When the grace of Jesus is alive and abundant in our souls, we’re truly rich, rich enough to give like Jesus did, to give not just our money or time or possessions, but our very selves (12:14a).

Usually we think of offering only as part of our monthly budget. This causes us to end up giving to church like we’re paying one of our bills. If we’re struggling financially we calculate, or give grudgingly. Other times we think too much about what the money will be used for and question whether it’s something worth giving to. There are times we give as if we’re doing somebody a great favor. Or we’re just trying to save on our income taxes. In the Bible there’s an important story about a couple in the early church who gave for the sake of their own reputation and honor (Ac5). But today’s passage encourages us to renew the grace of Jesus in our hearts every time we give. His grace makes our giving pleasing to God, and it makes us truly willing and joyful, and even inspiring.

Paul concludes by describing some other aspects of giving financially. It needs to be willing, and at the same time, realistic, according to what we have, not according to what we do not have, meaning we shouldn’t be going into debt in order to give (12). Healthy giving means that it should be done in way to really share. Some people shouldn’t be forced to give while others just enjoy—there should be equality, meaning that whenever people are blessed, they should be ready to share (13–15).

Let’s read verse 9 again. May God renew the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ deeply in our souls. May we realize that he became poor to make us rich. May God inspire us with his grace, so that we may excel in this grace of giving.