

The Grace of Giving (Discussion Guide on pg.12)

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

I heard of a man who was asked to give to an offering and he said, "Well, I think I could give \$10 and not feel it."

The usher said, "Why don't you give \$20 and feel it? It is only when you feel it that the blessing of giving comes."

Let me ask you, when was the last time you gave and felt it? In other words, when was the last time that your giving involved joyful sacrifice? Jesus said, "it's more blessed to give than to receive."

When I asked, "when was the last time you gave and felt it," I don't mean when was the last time it bothered you to give. Although our giving ought to be sacrificial, it should never be done begrudgingly.

It's been said that the meaning of true love is to "give until it hurts." But God's word teaches us to give until it feels good. As Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 9:7: *"For God loves a cheerful giver."*

We are going to see how the church in Macedonia gave joyfully and sacrificially. Paul called this kind of giving an act of grace. The way that they gave was a demonstration, a model, for the kind of giving that will bless us and delight the heart of God.

Main idea: God's grace is the motivation for radical generosity that magnifies the love of Jesus in and through our lives.

To unfold this theme, we are going to learn from the churches of Macedonia whom Paul commended for demonstrating the kind of generosity that magnifies the love of Christ.

1. They gave in dependence upon the grace God:

I want us to see first of all that they gave in dependence upon the grace of God. In the previous chapters, Paul recounted how Titus' visit to Corinth reaffirmed the mutual love and respect that Paul shared with the church. Because of Paul's previous letters of reproof and the

opposition to his ministry that had arisen within the church, Paul was concerned that there was a rift in their relationship.

But having received a report from Titus about how the church responded to his letter of reproof with genuine repentance, Paul was confident that he still had their trust as an apostle of Christ and that he could speak into their lives.

So, after testifying to their reconciled relationship, Paul shifts his focus to the topic of giving to the poor saints in Jerusalem. We know from 1 Corinthians 16 and from verse 6 of this chapter, that Paul addresses the topic of giving not only because of the need in Jerusalem, but also because the Corinthians, having already committed to giving, had not followed through.

Now, Paul doesn't directly address why they had not fully followed through on their promise to give to the relief effort, but it's possible that the temporary rift in Paul's relationship with the church may have had something to do with it.

But having resolved their conflicts in the grace and love of Christ, Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to refocus their attention on meeting the needs of poor saints. And he begins this call to grace filled generosity by pointing to the generosity of the churches in Macedonia.

He writes: *"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord,"* (2 Corinthians 8:1-3).

Again, Paul referred to the grace giving of the Macedonian churches to motivate the Corinthian believers to make good on their promise. Specifically, Paul pointed out that the churches in Macedonia gave extraordinarily more than what they could. They gave, as Paul explained, *"according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord"* (2 Corinthians 8:3).

What does it mean that they gave beyond their means?

It certainly means that they gave sacrificially. But it also means that there was something supernatural, something otherworldly at work in their hearts and lives.

Notice that it wasn't out of their prosperity that the Christians in Macedonia gave so generously. On the contrary, Paul says in verse two that they gave beyond their means during a period of great affliction and extreme poverty.

To help us grasp what that kind of giving looked like, let me give you an example that I came across:

A Christian businessman visited Korea with a local mission partner. During their travels, they came across a young man pulling a plough across a field, while an old man was guiding the plough through the furrows. The businessman took a photo. "Must be a pretty poor family" he commented. "Yes" replied the missionary, "those two men happen to be Christians. When their church was being built, they were eager to give something toward it, but they had no money, so they decided to sell their one and only ox and give the proceeds to the church. This spring they are pulling the plough themselves."

The man was silent for some moments, then he said, "That must have been a real sacrifice". "They did not see it that way" the missionary replied, "they thought themselves fortunate that they had an ox to sell." On his return the man went to his minister with the photo and said, "I want to do some plough work, until now I have never given anything to God that involved real sacrifice."

Let me ask you, why is it that the people who give most sacrificially are often those who have the least to give? This is true because the more money you possess the greater the temptation to allow money to possess you. The more money we have the greater the temptation to trust in money to do for us what only God can.

Notice that concerning those with great wealth, Paul gives this admonishment, *“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy”* (1 Timothy 6:17).

As we will see more in a moment, when God’s love, not money possesses you, you are more inclined to depend on the grace of God to be generous. When you can say like the Psalmist, the Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want and know that your Father in heaven graciously provides for His children, you can be radically generous.

Now, this is the key to understanding why the Macedonians believers gave the way that they did and why the Corinthians were not following through with their earlier promise to give likewise.

Again, Paul testified of the Macedonians in verse two that *“in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”*

This equation doesn't seem to add up. How does severe affliction, abundance of joy, and extreme poverty lead to an overflow of a wealth of generosity? It doesn't seem to add up unless you include in this equation, "the grace factor." Paul said in verse one: *“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia...”*

Notice, that the amazing generosity that was flowing from the churches of Macedonia was the result of the grace of God in their lives. Twice in this passage Paul refers to giving as an "act of grace."

Now, the word grace in the bible has more than one meaning. The meaning that we are probably most familiar with is the undeserved generosity of God to us. But the word grace in the scripture also speaks of the enabling power of God that flows in and through our lives.

For example, after Paul prayed to God three times about a great need in his life, God replied, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Corinthians 12:9)

It's important to note here that weakness does not produced power. Weakness or felt needs can drive us to prayer and keep us dependent upon God who is the source of the grace and power that we need most.

Likewise, it was what Paul called a "*severe test of affliction*" that enabled the Macedonian churches, by the grace and power of God, to give so sacrificially. Not that their severe affliction and extreme poverty produced the enabling power, but that it drove them to depend on the grace of God.

Committing on this, A.W. Tozer observed, "Before God can use a man greatly, He must first wound him deeply" (A.W. Tozer). I must admit, when I first heard those words they stunned me. But I've discovered that more often than not its prosperity not poverty that tempts me to look to what money can buy instead of what only the grace of God can supply.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a quadriplegic after a diving accident, and for decades since has become a powerful instrument of God's comfort to the church, wrote: "Felt weakness deepens dependency on Christ for strength each day. The weaker we feel, the harder we lean. And the harder we lean, the stronger we grow spiritually."

It's abundantly clear from scripture and history that those who are most mightily used of God have been through great adversity. Why? Because most often it's through adversity that we learn to earnestly pray and find that God's grace is truly enough.

Concerning how God allows adversity to awaken earnest prayer, one Pastor writes: "Please don't be among the number—I am pleading with you—who take the school of suffering, designed to teach us to pray, and make it the reason you have given up on prayer. Do you see

what I am saying? Some enter the fiery school of prayer and instead of learning to call on God, learn the opposite. [The fiery school of prayer is needed because, "our hearts are enfeebled by prosperity so that we don't make an effort to pray."] John Piper

This no doubt is another reason why the Corinthian believers, who lived in a much more prosperous city than the Macedonians, did not follow through on their earlier promise to give to the poor saints in Jerusalem. Their hearts were enfeebled or made weak by prosperity. As such, they began to lose sight of their need to depend on the grace of God for all of life.

Now, if being made weak spiritually by prosperity was a danger in first century Corinth, is this not also the case today and perhaps even more so?

O, how we need to resolve by God's grace that together we will guard our hearts from becoming enfeebled by prosperity and as a consequence depend on everything else but God for the journey of life. May the Lord have mercy on us and treat us gently in the fiery school of prayer.

2. They gave by devoting themselves first to God:

Secondly, notice that the Macedonian churches gave not only in dependence upon the grace of God, but by devoting themselves first to God. We read beginning in verse 3: *"For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4 begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— 5 and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us."* 2 Corinthians 8:3-5

It's important to note here that the churches in Macedonia didn't give because somebody put a guilt trip on them, or because they were manipulated to give. In fact, verse 5 seems to indicate that they were not even expected to give in light of their difficult circumstances. But

they not only wanted to give despite their circumstances, they begged to have the opportunity to give.

When you know the grace of God, you don't need to be coerced into giving to meet needs. It's your joy to do so.

Moreover, they didn't give to appease God. That is to say, they didn't give to get God off their backs or anyone else so that they could go back to business as usual. They didn't give with the attitude, "I gave the money; now go away." No! Paul said that they gave themselves first to God and then by the will of God to others.

Commenting on this passage, Warren Wiersbe noted: "If we give ourselves to God, we will have little problem giving our substance to God. If we give ourselves to God, we will also give of ourselves to others. It is impossible to love God and ignore the needs of your neighbor." (Warren Wiersbe)

Beloved, giving to God of our resources doesn't mean anything to God if we haven't given ourselves first to God and then unto one another. Your financial giving should never be a substitute for giving to God what He desires most, namely yourself.

I've seen parents that do this with their children. They give money and material things to try to appease them. They pay for their education, they buy them cars, and smart phones. However, they don't take the time to cultivate meaningful relationship by which they can shepherd the heart of their children.

Jesus doesn't need our money. He wants us, He wants you. He shed His blood, He gave His life to redeemed us from our sin so that we could know the joy of knowing Him, belonging to Him, and living for His eternal Kingdom.

Have you given yourself wholeheartedly first to God and to His people? To know the manifest presence and power of God we must seek first the kingdom of God, which involves graciously and

sacrificially giving of our time, talents and treasure to build up the church in love.

Because the Macedonians gave themselves to God, whose love and joy filled their hearts, they overflowed with a wealth of generosity, a generosity that touched the lives of others and brought glory to Jesus Christ.

Similarly, Paul urged the Corinthians to look to the grace and love of God so that they would graciously follow through with their promise to help the poor saints in Jerusalem. This was vital to their continual spiritual growth.

He continues in verse 6: *“Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also”* (2 Corinthians 8:6-7).

It appears that at some point, Paul had sent Titus to encourage the Corinthians to act upon their previous commitment to give to the relief efforts, which he calls an act of grace. And he wanted them to do so not only for the sake of the poor saints in Jerusalem, but for their own spiritual growth and maturity.

They were excelling in other areas of their walk with Christ. They were growing in faith, in knowledge and zeal for the things of God. They had received great spiritual benefits from the love they had received, but when it came to generosity, they seemed to get stuck. Paul knew that although God doesn't need our money, how we view and handle money says a great deal about what we truly worship.

As Kent Hughes noted, “There is no way to grow to spiritual maturity without committing your finances to the Lord. Jesus can have our money and not have our hearts, but he cannot have our hearts without our money. Our handling of money defines our affections, the things we truly treasure, how tightly we are bound to the world, and so on.

In this, I would not be true to God's Word or to you if I did not say that some of you may have reached sticking spots in your spiritual growth because you have not begun to give as the Scriptures and conscience are directing you. I've heard all the "reasons" why one can't give. It's too hard. You have so many obligations. You'll begin when you get a full-time job. You'll begin when the car is paid for. "You'll begin when the children are done with school. You'll begin when you can really give something. You'll begin with the next promotion. But God's Word says to excel in this act of grace now." Kent Hughes

Jesus said, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. When money is your love and treasure, giving will not come easy to you. In fact, what you can "gain" and not what you can "give" will be the determining factor for the key decisions you make in life, like where you live, where you go to church, and the vocations you will pursue.

But when the love of Jesus captures your heart and you value Him above all else, giving generously is a joy. And the determining factor for the key decisions you make in life, like where you will live, where you will go to church, and what vocation you pursue, will not be all about what you can gain, but about whether you can give more of yourself to living for God's kingdom and contribute to the needs of others.

We come now to our final point.

3. They gave in demonstration of the love of God:

The Macedonian believers not only gave in dependence upon the grace of God, and by devoting themselves first to God, but they gave in demonstration of the love of God.

Notice again that in order to encourage the Corinthians believers to give, Paul writes: *"I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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."* (2 Corinthians 8:8, 9)

Paul was careful to express that he wasn't trying to order the Corinthians to give. Neither was he trying to put a guilt trip on the Corinthian believers. He pointed to the grace giving of the Macedonians because they were following the example of Christ.

As Jesus did for them, they gave themselves willingly, sacrificially and joyfully to meet the needs of others. God doesn't want us to give out of guilt, but out of joy and gratitude for the grace that He lavished on us when Jesus laid down His life to save us from our sins.

The King of kings, left the riches of His kingdom, took on flesh and subjected Himself to degradation on earth so that the spiritually destitute can receive the riches of heaven. He paid a debt that He did not owe on a cruel cross so that we could gain eternal riches that we could not earn.

Again, like the Macedonians, Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to prove the genuineness of their love through grace giving. And in the same way we the church are to be living proof of the saving power of God's love through how we joyfully, graciously and sacrificially give of ourselves and our resources to meet the needs of others.

As Paul also goes on to explain in verses 10-15, the mutual, sharing of the blessings that God bestows upon us so that no one in the community of faith goes without, is an essential mark of the church of Christ. He writes in verse 14, *"your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness."* 2 Corinthians 8:14

It should never be that in a community of faith that there would be someone in great need while others have abundance. Although the members of a church should not be obligated to give, when you know the love of God, you will be moved to give what you can to those in need. If this kind of mutual and otherworldly generosity does not characterize our church, we have no reason to believe that we have the blessings of God to be a compelling witness for Christ in this world.

Remember, in spite of severe trials and extreme poverty the Macedonian believers overflowed with a wealth of generosity that touched the lives of others for Christ. This was possible because unlike the Corinthians, whose prosperity caused them to take the grace of God for granted, their poverty drove them to depend upon God's grace.

Let's not fall into the same prosperity trap. And, by the grace of God, don't be among the number, who enter the school of suffering, designed to teach you to earnestly pray, and make it the reason you have given up on prayer.

Remember the Macedonians not only gave financially for the needs of others in dependence upon God, but they gave devoting themselves first to God and to others. By doing so willingly, joyfully and sacrificially they gave proof of the love of God, blessed the saints, and became a compelling Christlike example for others to follow.

Conclusion

Beloved, is there a commitment that you need to make to the Lord out of gratitude for what He's done for you and in dependence upon His enabling grace? Have you already made a commitment to Christ that perhaps you haven't fully followed through with? I urge you, for the love of God, to seek His grace today to do what He's calling you to do.

But remember, more than giving to meet someone else's needs, what we need most and what others around us need is for us to give all of ourselves to the Lord. When we give all of ourselves to Him by faith in His great love for us, everything else that we give in service to Him will be given with overflowing joy and gratitude. When we have all of Him and He has all of us, we have all we need.

O may we by the grace of God give all of ourselves to all that God is for us in Christ and live a life of radical generosity for the eternal good of others and for the greater fame of Jesus.

The Grace of Giving Discussion Guide

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Review

Main idea: God's grace is the motivation for radical generosity that magnifies the love of Jesus in and through our lives.

I heard of a man who was asked to give to an offering and he said, "Well, I think I could give \$10 and not feel it."

The usher said, "Why don't you give \$20 and feel it? Why is it important to give and feel it? What should we feel?"

Assess

It appears from 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 and, 2 Corinthians 8:10, that the Corinthians had not fully followed through on their promise to give to the relief effort in Jerusalem. What got in the way? Keep in mind that compared to the Macedonian churches, that were suffering great hardship when they gave to the relief effort, the Corinthians lived in a prosperous city and had an abundance of resources. Why did they struggle to follow through on their promise to give to the poor saints in Jerusalem?

What did the apostle Paul mean when he said that the Macedonian churches gave beyond their means in a time of severe affliction and extreme poverty? (2 Corinthians 8:3)

Why is it that the people who give most sacrificially are often those who have the least to give?

When writing about the radical generosity of the churches of Macedonia, Paul put it this way, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia..." (2 Corinthians 8:1). What is the connection between their radical generosity and the grace of God?

What did A.W. Tozer mean when he wrote, "Before God can use a man greatly, He must first wound him deeply." How do his words impact you? See also 2 Corinthian 12:9.

How can our hearts become enfeebled by prosperity so that we don't make an effort to pray?

Because of their extreme poverty, it doesn't appear that the Macedonian churches were expected to give to the relief effort (2 Corinthians 8:5). Yet they begged to have the opportunity to give (2 Corinthians 8:4). What motivated them?

What does it mean that the Macedonians gave themselves first to God and then by the will of God to the saints? How did giving themselves first to God shape their radical generosity?

Kent Hughes noted: "There is no way to grow to spiritual maturity without committing your finances to the Lord. Jesus can have our money and not have our hearts, but he cannot have our hearts without our money." How does money demonstrate where our hearts are at?

How does generosity prove our love? How did Jesus demonstrate his love through radical generosity? 2 Corinthians 8-9

Apply

How does the grace and love of Jesus motivate you to be generous?

God doesn't want your money; He wants you! Have you given something to God or the church in place of yourself? How do you need to remedy this and why?

Is there a commitment that you need to make to the Lord out of gratitude for what He's done for you and in dependence upon His enabling grace?

Have you already made a commitment to Christ that perhaps you haven't fully followed through with?