

This morning, I am in the eighth week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. This morning, we are going to be in chapters 8 & 9, a long section in which Paul is reminding them about a collection he was taking for the church in Judea, which had experienced a famine and was in need of help. Judea included Jerusalem, so it was a mostly Jewish church, and Corinth was a Greek church. As was his custom, Paul does not just remind them of the collection, but lays out a long treatise on generosity and why being generous should be a distinctive mark of the follower of Jesus. Let’s read the passage.

NIV 2 Corinthians 8:1- And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

Side note – the Macedonian churches includes churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.

*² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵ And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will. ⁶ So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of **grace on your part**. ⁷ But just as you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving. ⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. ¹⁰ And here is my advice 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**. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "He who*

gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not **have too little.**" ¹⁶ I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. ¹⁷ For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. ¹⁸ And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. ¹⁹ What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰ We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer **this liberal gift.** ²¹ For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. ²² In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. ²³ As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. ²⁴ Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it. ^{NIV 2 Corinthians 9:1} There is no need for me to write to you about this service **to the saints.** ² For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. ³ But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴ For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we-- not to say anything about you-- would be ashamed of having been so confident. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous **gift you had promised.** Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. ⁶ Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his **righteousness endures forever.**" ¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and **with everyone**

else. ¹⁴ *And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you.* ¹⁵ *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*

So in this passage, we see that Paul's immediate goal is that the Corinthians will take up a collection and give it to his ministry partner Titus so that he can take it to Judea, to meet the needs of the church in Judea, which has experienced a famine. But there is so much more going on here. This passage is so insightful about money, generosity, equality, and justice. The vision laid out in this passage of what an individual, the church, and even the larger community can look like when people are generous is really powerful and something we would do well to understand today. I think that in order to really understand this passage, we need to first understand what Paul does NOT say in order to persuade them, and then look at how he does persuade them to be generous.

What does Paul NOT say or do in this letter?

1) He never mentions money

If you look closely, you'll notice that Paul never even uses the word money. Look at the words he uses instead: "Grace, privilege, partnership, sharing, service, ministry, earnestness, love, willingness, generosity, abundance, liberal gift, undertaking, blessing, generous gift, good work."

Even though his goal is to get them to set aside money to send to the Judean church for famine relief, the language he uses makes it clear that to Paul, this opportunity is not really about money but about something deeper. It's about something on the heart level. We will get into that more in a few minutes.

2) He never orders them to give

Look at 8:8 - *I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.*

And 9:7 - *Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

Paul is clearly communicating that it is important that they take part in this opportunity, that if they truly know God and have been transformed by the gospel

of grace, then they will joyfully give. But he will not command or compel them to give. He wants the gift to be given sincerely and with joy.

3) He does not give them an amount or percentage to give

He does tell them to set aside 10%, or 5%, or anything else. In fact, you will never find amounts or percentages given anywhere after the death of Jesus when it comes to giving. You may be familiar with the tithe, which in the Old Testament was the first 10% of what you owned, that was given to God to support the priests, the work of the temple, and to care for the poor and needy. But nowhere on this side of Jesus' death and resurrection do you see anyone upholding the tithe or giving a specific dollar amount.

Instead, what you see repeatedly in the New Testament is what you see here in 2 Corinthians: **the focus is on generosity, which is much more of a heart issue**. Think about it: if your heart is inclined towards generosity, towards giving and sharing to meet the needs of others, then you don't need someone to give you a number or percentage. You just look for opportunities to be generous.

Clearly, there are many churches and religious leaders who could learn something from Paul. If we are following in the footsteps of Paul, and of Jesus, then we will never coerce people to give a specific dollar amount or percentage, but instead we will help them to be transformed by the gospel of God's grace into generous people, who joyfully and sincerely give from their heart.

So Paul never mentions money, nor does he command them or tell them to give a specific amount or percentage. What does Paul focus on instead in order to encourage them towards generosity? I see four things:

1) The generosity and grace of God transforms us

2 Corinthians 8:9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The word grace is best understood as **"an undeserved gift given by unobligated giver."** God owes us nothing, and we deserved nothing, but He gives generously to us. He gave us life, and more than that, He gave us eternal life through His Son, who though he was rich, living in the wealth of heaven, left all of that to become poor, to become human. As Paul wrote elsewhere:

Philippians 2:5-8 - *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!*

Jesus did not live as a wealthy man, but lived among those of average means. But through His poverty, we have become rich. Not materially wealthy in this world, but spiritually and eternally wealthy. Consider:

Romans 8:16-17 - *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

As adopted children of the heavenly Father, we are heirs. We have all we need in Him.

As Gregory of Nazianus put it, “*Christ was made poor that we through His poverty might be rich. He took the form of a servant that we might regain liberty. He descended that we might be exalted. He was tempted that we might overcome. He was despised that He might fill us with glory. He died that we might be saved.*”

And if we know that He gave us His Son, we can trust that He will provide all we need.

Romans 8:32 - *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

Listen to me: those who understand the extravagant love of God as displayed in giving His Son for us when we were still sinners will be slowly but surely transformed into generous people. Yes, Paul wants the Corinthians to give, but the main reason is that he is convinced that a lack of generosity in this situation would reveal that their hearts do not understand God’s grace or do not trust in His love and care for them. Similarly, if you are not a generous person, you need to examine your heart. Do you understand God’s grace and generosity towards you? Do you trust in His love and care for you? Clearly, Paul is trying to convince them that a proper understanding of who God is and what He had done for them in Christ should result in them being cheerful givers, just as the Macedonian church was.

2 Corinthians 8:2-4 - *Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*

Even though the Macedonians are poor, they get the gospel more than the wealthy Corinthians do, and are putting them to shame by their generosity, despite their poverty and trials. As Paul goes on to declare:

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 - *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

Look once again at the generosity and grace of God. God is able to make all grace abound to you so that you will have all you need to abound in every good work. Listen: everything good in your life is a gift from God. Even your ability to work and the opportunities you have are gifts from Him. God loves you and cares for you. And as you step out in generosity, God will make all grace abound to you, so that you will have all you need for every good work that you do. And when I say generosity, I am not just talking about money. We give ourselves – and this does not always have to be financial:

2 Corinthians 8:5 - *And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*

This is all related to his second reason to be generous:

2) True wealth is not material

Listen carefully: none of Paul's words promise material wealth. Anyone who tells you otherwise is deceiving you. When you sow a seed, you do not reap more seeds. You reap fruit. You reap a harvest. The promise is that you will be wealthy in ways that transcend material wealth. Hopefully you have learned by now that having a lot of money and possessions does not make you truly rich. Remember Jesus' words to two of the churches in Revelation, Laodicea and Smyrna:

Revelation 3:17 - *You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*

Revelation 2:8-9 - *"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty-- yet you are rich!*

Think of It's a Wonderful Life – to my brother George, the richest man in town.

Or think of Paul quoting Jesus:

Acts 20:35 - *In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is **more blessed to give than to receive.**'"*

Our material wealth is to be used for God's kingdom, to serve God and others. And that will gain true wealth for us.

Luke 12:32-34 - *"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a **treasure in heaven** that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

True wealth is not having a million dollars in the bank. There are many miserable millionaires who can attest to that. True wealth comes when you don't have to worry about money because you know that God will care for your needs. When you can be generous and bless others and know that God will supply everything you need. True wealth comes when you have let go of the lie that happiness is found in a bigger bank account or more possessions.

3) Generous people create a more just and equitable world

2 Corinthians 8:13-15 - *Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. ¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

Equality is a big deal these days. But Paul knows that you can't force people into seeking equality through laws and coercion and public shaming, the way the world does. True equality comes through grace, as the extravagant love and care of God frees people up to be generous and meet the needs of those who are suffering.

In verse 15, Paul quotes from Exodus and the manna in the wilderness.

Exodus 16:16-20 - *This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'"¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little.¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed.¹⁹ Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning."²⁰ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell.*

As the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, God sent something called manna every day to feed them. But they were only to take what they needed for the day, except on the sixth day, when they were to take enough for two days so that they could rest on the Sabbath. If they took too much, the manna would rot. Moses refers to this experience to highlight how important it is that nobody hoard too much at the expense of others. It as if he is telling them that too much wealth will rot you spiritually.

1 Timothy 6:6-11 - *But godliness with contentment is great gain.⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it.⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.⁹ People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.¹¹ But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.*

If we have been given wealth, it is to care for our needs and then to help others.

Ephesians 4:28 - *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

This past week, as I was preparing this section, God gave me a strange example. A woman came to the door of the church, and she said that she had been a regular at the Friday evening prayer meeting that we hosted before COVID for prayer against human trafficking. She said that she had a couch set like ours, but that the company had only sent her one pillow instead of two, and that as hard as she and the company tried, they could not find a second pillow anywhere. She asked if there was any chance she could have one of our pillows. Our couch had four pillows, certainly more than we needed. So I gave her a pillow. It is right for the one who has more than enough to share with the one who does not have enough.

The goal is righteousness and equality. Righteousness is right-relatedness to God, the world, others, and ourselves. Paul is concerned with right relationships between people. Particularly in this case, right relationships between Jews and Gentiles in Christ. One of Paul's goals was undoubtedly to strengthen the bonds between Jewish and Greek Christians. You can help them out now, and some day they may be the ones helping you out, whether materially or spiritually. Plus, they have already helped you out by including you in the gospel community.

Romans 15:25-27 - *Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.*

Notice that Paul says here that generosity is not just about giving money. We can bless people in so many more ways. Prayer, tangible help, a listening ear, counsel, emotional support through difficult times, and so many other ways.

4) It will give God greater glory

2 Corinthians 9:11-13 - *You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.*

What a witness it is to the world when the church is generous, when we are a community of extravagant givers, when people know that the church will care for them and help them in their time of need. Now, again, generosity and help does not always give people money. But it is caring enough for people to help them in their time of need with whatever help is best.

1 John 3:16-18 - This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

We learn in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9 that a generous and giving heart is an evidence that you understand and have been transformed by the gospel of God's grace and that you know who He is and how He loves and cares for you. When you know God, you know that we are all members of one family in Christ, with a Father who cares for us, and so we do not need to hoard what we have, because God provides abundantly what we need if we will only stop clutching our stuff and be generous with our brothers and sisters. I encourage you this morning to excel in the grace of giving. What a witness to the world it will be for us to be a generous people who give as the Lord has given to us. This is not about a certain dollar amount. It is about being eager to give, even beyond what is comfortable, because God gave His best for you. I encourage you to sow generously, that you will reap generously the blessing that comes from loving others and creating a more just and equitable world.