

# The Insanity of Obedience: Generosity

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2 Corinthians 8:1-7

November 5, 2017

*And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup>In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup>For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup>they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. <sup>5</sup>And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. <sup>6</sup>So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your*

*part. <sup>7</sup>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.*

*God uses our giving to change the world*

The Apostle Paul was taking up a collection for a mission project in Jerusalem. The Christians in Jerusalem were experiencing great hardship because of a drought. The wealthy church in Corinth had made a big financial pledge but so far had not followed through. To encourage them, Paul tells them what the Macedonian church has done. The Macedonians were experiencing poverty and hardship. They were not a rich congregation like Corinth. Yet they were giving generously, even beyond their means and as a result God had blessed them with an abundance of joy.

What had happened to the Macedonian church that resulted in this generous

attitude? It was grace. Listen to verse 1, “*We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia...*” To Paul, giving is a grace.

The church realized that they were recipients of the grace of Jesus Christ. Jesus had given his all to them on the cross, now they felt called to give their all. Christ had been generous to them, now they wanted to be generous with what God had given them. It was a call to stewardship. A steward is a person who manages what belongs to someone else. In the biblical sense, a steward is the manager of what belongs to God. Once we have encountered the living God and made him the leader of our life, we become his. We say, “Lord, I surrender my life to you, take it and all that I have and use it according to your will.”

Then God responds. “I receive that life, and all that you have. Now I make you the

manager of that life—your time, your talents, and your treasure, but remember its mine, and you need to use it according to my purpose.”

What makes this surrender possible is grace. In the passage before us, the apostle used the Macedonian example of generosity to challenge the Corinthian church—and us. We find that grace is a supernatural gift that leads us to give rather than a legalistic extraction that forces us to give.

Look at verse three. “*For as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means.*” Another translation says, “*they were freely willing.*”

The grace of giving is not so much the result of outward expulsion as the consequence of inward propulsion. There is something that happens when a new love enters your life. It has enormous

power to expel competing interests with no sense of loss at all.

I spent every spare moment of my youth out at my grandfather's farm riding, training and showing my horses. Every spare dime I spent on equipment and feed bills. While my friends got things for Christmas like clothes, basketballs, or skateboards, I was getting feed buckets or bridles. The guys at the tack shop knew me by first name. Everything I read was about horses, every friend I had had horses, every weekend was spent in the show ring.

Then I met Melinda. Suddenly horses and saddles were a thing of the past and dinners, dates, flowers were embraced. It was no struggle; it was the power of a new love in my life. Look at the wedding ring on her finger. I paid for that by selling the last horse in my barn. Did I feel some sense of loss, some dark compulsion making me forsake my former love for a

new one? Not at all. It's the power of a new affection.

When there is a new love in our lives, that love calls us to give and then to give more. When we love Christ and love his people as he loves us, our giving flows out of that love.

The secret of the Macedonian giving was simple: "*they voluntarily gave...*" A new love had invaded their lives and it released them to give freely, generously and without hesitation. The love of Christ is like that. It brings about a change of affection and that change in itself creates a new desire in the heart.

*God uses our giving to change us*

Sacrificial giving is that kind of giving which changes our lifestyles in some way because we give. The Macedonians were so full of the grace of God that they gave beyond their means. Verse 2 says, "*For during a severe ordeal of affliction, their*

*abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”*

Paul took great pains to show that it was not in circumstances of prosperity that the believers in Macedonia were giving. It's always tempting to wait until our circumstances are good before we become generous; all the bills paid, the kids through college and on their own, the promotion, the house paid off. Trouble is that day never comes, at least not in our house. The Macedonians were poor. Whether it was caused by war, or famine, or persecution, or some other factor, their circumstances were terrible. But they saw the need for this special offering for the Jerusalem church and gave.

It's not what we have, but what we do with what we have that makes the difference. The Macedonians knew this. Paul makes it explicitly clear that grace giving does not produce equal gifts, but it does produce

equal sacrifice. Verse 12 says, “*The gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have...that there may be a fair balance.*” Giving is not a matter of equal capacity to give, but it is a matter of equal opportunity.

#### *It changes us spiritually*

Finally notice that generosity leads to spiritual growth. Verse 5 says, “*They gave themselves first to the Lord.*” More than anything else, their giving was the outward expression of their inward relationship with Jesus Christ. But before they gave to Paul's collection, they took a very important first step—they gave themselves to the Lord. Before they laid down their gifts, they laid down their lives; they surrendered their life, their all.

The Macedonian Christians gave simply out of an outgrowth of their love of Christ. Generosity is not the only indicator of love for Christ, but it will be an indicator. People may give without loving God, but

they do not love God without giving. Throughout my whole ministry I have always, always seen a close connection between a mature spirituality and generosity.

I would be thrilled beyond measure if all of us here today would give ourselves first to the Lord. My dream for this church is that every one of you will get connected with God, discover the amazing depth and breathe and height of his love for you and how he gave his all for you on the cross. I want each of us to know what it feels like to experience the forgiveness of sins, to be justified by faith in his grace, to be filled with his Holy Spirit, and to know that we will spend eternity with him. That would make me happy indeed.

A few months ago, one of our members, Pam Moon had her third kidney transplant. She is an amazing woman of faith and courage. But equally amazing is her friend Janice who donated her kidney

to Pam. It's pretty easy to be an organ donor after you die, but to give up an organ while you are still living is courageous. I'm not sure I could do that.

This kind of generosity seems insane. How little I have to suffer and yet what a struggle it is to see beyond my own circumstances when asked to give. The generous heart that would give up something so precious to give someone else a shot at life reminds me of another one who gave up his life so that we may have our only hope at eternity.

Jesus gave his all for us. This is our chance as well. To give so that others may have a chance as well, not out of obligation or duty or guilt but out of love for Christ.

Nothing pleases God more than a life well used in service to him. Nothing will make your life more satisfying than to be in partnership with God.

*Acts 4 generosity*

What might happen if we did this? Look at Acts 4:32. *“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold...and it was distributed to each as any had need.”*

They were insanely generous because something had radically changed their lives. They were not longer possessed by their possessions. If God said, “give it away”, they did with no regrets.

Years ago we had a family friend named Jerry who was a professor of Osteopathic medicine at Ohio University. His kids were grown and on their own and he was near retirement so he decided to leave a very comfortable position, sell everything and moved to Red Bird Mission in the hills of

Eastern Kentucky. Red Bird is a United Methodist mission to the poverty stricken people of Appalachia. Jerry ran the medical clinic there. It seemed insane but Jerry loved what he was doing because he believed it was what God wanted him to do and because he was sharing himself with others.

Notice the unity of the church. Verse 32 says, *“They were of one heart and soul”* They weren’t of one soul and heart because everyone looked alike or had the same opinions. It was because of their mutual love and belief in God.

This unity is demonstrated by their readiness to meet one another’s needs. It was based on love of neighbor and a deep faith that God would take care of their needs so that when they saw a need, they cared enough to do something about it.

They were not serving money, they were serving God. This gave them a freedom to

give. There is this spirit of generosity that pervaded the early church.

Were there exceptions? Sure! The very next chapter tells the story of two exceptions named Ananias and Sapphira. These two decided to lie about what they were giving to the church. They wanted the approval of giving away their possessions while secretly keeping it. And they paid for it with their lives.

How possessed are you by your possessions?

A few years ago Melinda and I decided to get rid of our consumer debt. We paid off our credit cards, our car loans, and increased our house payments. We have an emergency fund in case something comes up we hadn't planned on. The difference in stress is remarkable. Arguments about which bills to pay are gone. We still have our differences on money. But we are much more united.

And the really cool thing is the freedom we now have to respond to God's call. If we want to help someone in need, we can do it. We decided to increase our pledge to the church and go above and beyond tithing. If there is a special ministry we want to help fund, we are free to respond. Money serves us instead of us serving money. We don't serve money. We serve God!

In Paul's first letter to Timothy he writes, *"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.<sup>18</sup> Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. <sup>19</sup> In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life."*

Do good...rich in good deeds...generous...willing to share. The

result? “*Life that is truly life.*” Those words echo in our hearts, don’t they? Isn’t that what we are looking for?

### *Conclusion*

A couple weeks ago I was in the drive-through at Starbucks. The car ahead of me was taking a long time and I was getting irritated. Finally I pulled up to the window and handed the clerk my money. “It’s free today”, she replied. “The woman in front paid for it. She wanted to apologize for taking so long.”

I thought to myself, “Mark, you are such a jerk. You need to be more patient and less self-centered.”

Generosity does that. It’s no longer needing to be in control. It comes when we realize it really is more blessed to give than to receive. It’s when we understand that all things belong to God and he gives it to you to help other people. And it’s insane. This does not add up for the average

accountant. It frees us from holding tightly onto our possessions, from having a miserly spirit; it frees us to accept and love people with all their foibles and all their failures.

And while it seems insane it feels awfully good and awfully right. So find a way to be generous today. Give away some of your time, your treasure or talent. Expect nothing back. See what happens.



