

LESSON 9

They Were Generous

Where did they learn to give like that?

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia: During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will. So we urged Titus that just as he had begun, so he should also complete among you this act of grace. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this act of grace. I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

— 2 Corinthians 8:1–9

Introduction

Last week the mind of Christ refused to grasp. The Lord of glory who did not clutch at equality with God emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and obeyed all the way down to a Roman cross. That descent is the mind Paul calls the church to share. This week the hands of the church open. Generosity is humility with money in it. The same mind that counts others as more important than itself ends up with hands that part with what was once held tight. Paul moves in the very next breath of the New Testament's "one another" life from the disposition behind the action to one of its plainest and most costly forms.

The question in today's subtitle says it all. *Where did they learn to give like that?* Paul answers in two ways. The first answer sits in verse 5: the Macedonians gave themselves first to the Lord. The second answer sits in verse 9: they knew the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was rich and became poor so that they, who had nothing, might become rich. The lesson walks from the first answer to the second, and along the way it shows what the grace of God looks like when it works its way through our bank account.

The Setting Behind Paul's Charge

Paul writes 2 Corinthians 8 with a year-long project in mind. The relief offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem had been on his heart for a long time. It began in response to a famine prophesied by Agabus and met by the church at Antioch, which sent aid to the brothers in Judea by the hand of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27–30). Paul carried the concern forward as a standing feature of the Gentile mission. He

gave the Corinthians practical instructions for systematic weekly giving in his previous letter (1 Corinthians 16:1–4). He will name the collection again in Romans 15:25–27, on his way to deliver it, and once more in his defense before Felix, where he says plainly, "After many years I came to bring charitable gifts and offerings to my people" (Acts 24:17). The offering was relief and symbol at once: real money for real hunger, and visible proof to a watching church that Gentile believers and Jewish believers were one body in Christ.

Macedonia in Paul's day was poor. The province had been bled by Roman taxation and civil war. Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea were small, persecuted congregations. Corinth, by contrast, was a wealthier city and held a wealthier church. Corinth had promised to participate in the collection the year before and had stalled. Paul writes 2 Corinthians 8 to revive the Corinthians' commitment, and he revives it by holding up an example they would never have predicted. The poorer churches finished first. The Corinthians need to see what grace did in Macedonia before they can finish what grace started in their own city.

The Grace of God Given Among the Churches of Macedonia

Paul opens with the source. Before he names any thing the Macedonians did, he names what God did in them. The first word of the passage in Greek is *charis*, grace, the unearned kindness of God that produces what could not otherwise have been produced. The Macedonians' generosity is grace before it is gift. *Charis* will appear ten times across 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 in connection with this offering. Paul cannot describe Christian giving without keeping the word in his mouth. The collection is grace given to the Macedonians, grace flowing through the Macedonians, and grace returning to God in thanksgiving on the other side.

The teaching is theological from the first sentence. The Macedonians are not the heroes of the story. The grace at work in them is. That order matters for the rest of the lesson. Begin with the giver and the gift looks like obligation. Begin with grace and the gift looks like response. Paul begins with grace.

The Strange Math

Verse 2 is the verse that does not add up.

During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

Read that slowly. Severe trial. Extreme poverty. The natural sum is contraction. A persecuted, struggling church should close the hand and protect what little is left. The Macedonian column instead shows two things that should not be there: abundant joy and a wealth of generosity. The Greek behind "wealth" is *ploutos*, the ordinary word for material riches. The Greek behind "extreme poverty" is *ptōcheia*, beggar's poverty, the bottom of the social ladder. Paul writes the two words into the same verse on purpose. The poorest churches produced *ploutos* of generosity.

The variable that changes the equation is grace. The Greek behind "generosity" in the same verse is *haplotēs*, a word whose root meaning is singleness or simplicity. Generous giving in Paul's vocabulary is

undivided giving, a heart with no double mind about whether to part with what it has. Affliction plus poverty plus joy plus grace equals a wealth of singlehearted giving. The math is impossible by every natural measure. The math is the gospel running through people's checkbooks. The Macedonians are the proof that a church does not give out of surplus. A church gives out of grace.

Beyond Their Ability, Begging for the Privilege

Verses 3 and 4 add two surprises that Paul wants the Corinthians to feel. The Macedonians gave "according to their ability and even beyond their ability." Paul is careful. He is not commending recklessness. He is naming a generosity that did not stop at the line a spreadsheet would have drawn. The next phrase removes the last possible objection: "of their own accord." The Greek is *authairetoi*, a word that means under no compulsion, by their own choosing. No one twisted their arm. Paul did not lean on them. The pressure came from inside, and the pressure was grace.

The second surprise is in verse 4. The Macedonians "begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints." The verbs are reversed from anything Paul expected. He had anticipated needing to ask. Instead the Macedonians asked him. The Greek pairs *koinōnia*, fellowship or sharing, with *diakonia*, ministry or service. They wanted the *koinōnia* of being part of the *diakonia*. The collection was not a tax they tolerated and certainly not an appeal they endured. It was a fellowship they wanted in on. The poorer church in the room begged to be included in the offering. That is the picture Paul holds up to a wealthier church that needed to be reminded.

They Gave Themselves First to the Lord

Verse 5 explains what the spreadsheet cannot. "Not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will." Paul names the gift behind the gift. Before the Macedonians gave their money, they gave themselves. The order is the lesson. A heart already handed to the Lord finds it natural to hand over a coin. A heart that has not been given will guard the coin every time. Paul does not say the Macedonians gave themselves along with their gift. He says they gave themselves first. The money followed the person. The order explains the strange math of verse 2, and it answers the question on the schedule.

Where did the Macedonians learn to give like that? The first answer is here. They learned it the day they surrendered themselves. The gift of the wallet is downstream of the gift of the self. Every generous Christian Paul ever met had walked through verse 5 before he ever walked through verse 3.

Excel in This Act of Grace

Verses 6 through 8 turn the Macedonian story toward Corinth. Paul urges Titus to finish among the Corinthians what he had started: this *charis*, this "act of grace." Verse 7 names the Corinthians' strengths: faith, speech, knowledge, all diligence, love. The list is generous. Paul is not lecturing a failing church. He is asking a strong church to grow strong in one more area. "Excel also in this act of grace." Generosity is meant to be a body's competency, a thing the church gets good at across years. The church that excels in faith and speech and knowledge is to add this to the list of things it is known for.

Verse 8 adds an honest note. "I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love." Paul does not arm-twist. He sets the Macedonians next to the Corinthians and lets the comparison do its work. The principle is plain. Words can lie. An open hand cannot. Love that talks about brothers in need and keeps the wallet closed is not love that Paul will recognize. Love that opens the wallet without speech is the love Paul is asking the Corinthians to grow into.

The companion chapter pushes the same theme further. Each one is to give as he has decided in his heart, "not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). The sower who sows generously reaps generously, and the sower who sows sparingly reaps sparingly (2 Corinthians 9:6). And God is able to make every grace overflow to the church so that, "having all you need in every way at all times, you will overflow in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). The cycle Paul describes is the same cycle the Macedonians lived: grace from God, generosity from the church, thanksgiving back to God through the brothers who received the gift (2 Corinthians 9:11–12). The whole loop runs on the *charis* it began with.

Where They Learned to Give Like That

Verse 9 is the hinge of the entire passage and the deeper answer to the question the lesson asks. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." The descent of Christ that Lesson 8 walked in theological language is now walked in financial language. The Greek is exact. He was *plousios*, rich. He became *ptōchos*, the same beggar-word from verse 2. He did it so that the bankrupt might become *plousios* in him. The Macedonians' giving has a lineage, and the lineage runs to a cross. They could give beyond their means because they had received beyond their means. Generosity in the New Testament is always cruciform. Christ emptied his account into ours, and the church that has been enriched by that exchange writes checks that look like the exchange that funded them.

The instinct did not begin with the Macedonians. Israel was a giving people because the Lord was a giving God. The gleaning laws left the corners of the field for the poor and the foreigner (Leviticus 19:9–10). Deuteronomy commanded an open hand to the poor brother: "Give to him, and don't have a stingy heart when you give, and because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you do" (Deuteronomy 15:10). At the building of the tabernacle the people brought so much that Moses had to command them to stop, because what they had brought was already more than enough (Exodus 36:6–7). At the offering for the temple, David prayed back the only honest prayer a generous giver can pray: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? For everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your own hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14). The early church inherited an old instinct in a new key. The grace that ran through Israel ran through the Macedonians, and it ran from a cross.

Looking to Jesus

The Macedonians learned to give from the Lord they had given themselves to. Look at the generosity they were looking at.

Consider how he turned water into wine at Cana, more than the wedding could use, the first sign of a kingdom that runs over the edge of the jar (John 2:1–11). The Lord did not measure the gift to the request. He filled six stone water jars to the brim.

Consider how he fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish and left twelve baskets of fragments behind (Mark 6:41–44). Abundance in the hand of the One who would soon be broken. The numbers are the point. The crowd ate until they were satisfied, and there was still more left over than what had been there to begin with.

Consider how he touched the leper before the law would have permitted it. "Reaching out his hand, Jesus touched him. 'I am willing,' he told him. 'Be made clean'" (Mark 1:41). The Lord paid with his own ceremonial purity to give the man his life back. Generosity that costs something at the cost-line, not somewhere else.

Consider how he watched the widow drop two small coins into the temple treasury and called his disciples over to notice what no one else had noticed: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those giving to the temple treasury" (Mark 12:43). The smallest gift in the building was the largest gift in the kingdom, and the Lord made sure his disciples saw it.

Consider how he told the parable of the Samaritan who poured oil and wine on a stranger's wounds, paid the innkeeper out of his own purse, and promised more on the way back (Luke 10:30–37). The Lord chose that picture, on purpose, as the answer to a lawyer's question about who counts as a neighbor. The picture is generosity that does not stop when the obvious favor is done.

Consider how he received Mary's pouring of costly perfume on his feet without flinching, and defended her against those who would have measured the gift in denarii: "She has done a noble thing for me" (Mark 14:6). The Lord knew the worth of generosity given to him directly, and he honored it in front of the men who could not see it.

Consider how he stretched out his hands on a Roman cross, the richest man in the universe paying his whole estate into the account of bankrupt sinners, the verse 9 of Paul's letter spoken in blood. "Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The pattern is the Lord pouring himself out so that others might be full.

A Final Encouraging Word

The strange math of verse 2 is still strange, and it is still true. A church that knows the grace of verse 9 has the variable that changes the equation. The Macedonians were not naturally generous. They were graced into generosity, by a Lord they had first given themselves to, who had first given himself for them. The pattern is the same in every congregation that learns to give like that. It runs from the cross, through a surrendered heart, out into a hand that does not need to be persuaded to open.

You have probably seen the Macedonian arithmetic at work. Meals delivered to families in the middle of a hard week, with no fuss. Bills quietly paid out of sight, by hands that did not want to be named. Mission

work supported beyond what a careful budget should have allowed, because the body wanted in on the privilege. Brothers and sisters writing checks in seasons that were not financially easy, because something deeper than the bank balance was doing the writing. Each one was the same grace running the same direction. Each one was the verse 9 exchange echoing into a checkbook.

The encouragement is not a fundraising appeal. It is an invitation. Give yourselves first to the Lord again this week, the way the Macedonians did. Watch what the Lord does with the hands that follow. The Lord who became poor that the church might become rich is still rich enough to fund the generosity he is calling for. The promise of 2 Corinthians 9:8 still stands. God is able to make every grace overflow to the church, so that the church has enough to overflow into every good work.

For Discussion

1. Paul opens 2 Corinthians 8 by calling the Macedonians' generosity a "grace of God" before he names anything they did. What changes in how we read this passage when we start with grace rather than with their effort, and what changes in how we read our own giving?

2. Verse 2 is the verse that does not add up: severe affliction plus extreme poverty plus abundant joy yielded a wealth of generosity. Where have you seen the same strange math at work in a Christian's life, and what does it tell us about what generosity actually depends on?

3. The Macedonians "begged earnestly for the privilege" of giving (2 Corinthians 8:4). The verbs are reversed from what Paul expected. What is the difference between a church that has to be persuaded to give and a church that asks to be included, and how does a body get from the first to the second?

4. Paul names the heart of the matter in 2 Corinthians 8:5: they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to others. Where in your own life have you seen the order matter, that the surrender of the person comes before the surrender of the resource? What happens when the order gets reversed?

5. Verse 9 names the lineage of every Christian act of generosity: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was rich and became poor so that we might become rich. How does keeping that exchange in view shape the way you think about money, possessions, and giving in a given week?

6. The companion chapter says God loves a cheerful giver and that he is able to make every grace overflow to the church (2 Corinthians 9:7–8). What is the difference between a cheerful giver and a dutiful one, and what role does confidence in God's supply play in producing the cheer?