LESSON 13

Abounding in Love

And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work. — 2 Corinthians 9:8

We abound in love; we sow generously and give cheerfully, trusting the God who makes every grace overflow to us, until our gifts turn into thanksgiving for His indescribable gift.

Introduction

THIS IS THE LAST LESSON OF THE QUARTER. It finishes Paul's appeal, and then it looks back over what thirteen weeks have been saying. Lesson 12 closed with a three-part assignment. The first was to watch for *cheerful*, the fourth of the words Romans 12:8 attached to the gifts in Lesson 2. It shows up in 9:7, the only place in the New Testament the adjective appears. The second was to count *all* and *every*. Count always, everything, and everyone too, and the paragraph says it eight times in ten verses, five of them in verse 8 alone.[82] The third was to follow the gift to where it lands. It lands in thanksgiving to God.

The lesson follows Paul through the gift Corinth had promised (9:1-5), the sower and the cheerful giver (9:6-7), the God who supplies every grace (9:8-11), and the thanksgiving the gift produces (9:12-15). Then it goes to a grain of wheat that fell into the ground, and from there it looks back over the whole quarter.

2 Corinthians 9:1-5 – Ready as a Gift

Paul opens chapter 9 by saying it is unnecessary to write about the collection (9:1). Then he keeps writing about it for fourteen more verses.

Corinth had been first to say yes, and Paul had bragged on them in Macedonia (9:2). Now Macedonia had finished, and Corinth had not. If Macedonians traveled south with Paul and found nothing ready, everybody would be embarrassed (9:4).

So, Paul sent the brothers ahead *so that it will be ready as a gift and not as an extortion* (9:5). The word translated *gift* is *eulogia*, the ordinary word for a blessing. It appears twice in verse 5 and twice more in verse 6, where the CSB renders it *generously*.[83] Set against it is *pleonexia*, the grasping word usually translated *greed*. A gift squeezed out of a reluctant church at the last minute would feel like something taken. Paul wants the church to hear what follows about seed and harvest as blessing.

2 Corinthians 9:6-7 – The Sower and the Cheerful Giver

The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Every farmer in Achaia knew it. Seed held back in the barn stays safe and grows nothing.

Paul's next verses close the door on reading this as a scheme for getting rich. The harvest he describes is grace for more good work (9:8), righteousness that lasts (9:9-10), and enough to be generous again (9:11). The sower reaps so that he can sow.

Then Paul turns from the field to the heart. *Each person should do as he has decided in his heart.* Decided describes a choice made ahead of time and left standing.[84] Paul rules out two other ways: *not reluctantly or out of compulsion. Reluctantly* is literally "out of grief," giving that hurts the way a loss hurts. *Compulsion* is pressure from outside.

Since God loves a cheerful giver. For twelve weeks this study has been telling the church to love. Here Paul says what God loves. The line echoes the Greek version of Proverbs 22:8. *Cheerful* is *hilaros*. We get hilarious from it, but Paul means gladness, the look of someone who's happy to give.

With that, all four words Romans 12:8 attached to the gifts have turned up in this one appeal, three in chapter 8 and the last one here.

2 Corinthians 9:8-11 – Every Grace Overflowing

Verse 8 answers the sparing sower's fear that there won't be enough left. *And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work.*

God is able uses the rare verb Lesson 4 met in Romans 14:4: *the Lord is able to make him stand*.[85] The power that keeps a weak brother on his feet is the power that keeps a giving church supplied.

Overflow and *excel* translate the same Greek term, *perisseuō*. God makes grace overflow to the church so that the church can overflow in good work. The supply comes first, and the *good work* follows. Every good work is the phrase Paul prayed over the Thessalonians in Lesson 11 (2 Thessalonians 2:17).

Then there is *everything you need*. The word is *autarkeia*, sufficiency.[86] It shares a root with the verb the Lord used when He told Paul, *My grace is sufficient for you* (2 Corinthians 12:9). In Lesson 3, grace was enough for a thorn that never came out. Here the same grace is enough for a church that opens its hand. If you've found grace sufficient for your weakness, you can trust it with your wallet.

Paul backs the promise with Psalm 112:9. *He distributed freely; he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever* (9:9). *Distributed freely* is literally "scattered," the sower's motion, and what the godly man scattered didn't vanish.[87]

Verse 10 borrows the language of Isaiah 55:10. *Now the one who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will also provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness.* Where did the sower get his seed? God put it in his sack, and God multiplies what is sown.

You will be enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us (9:11). *Enriched* comes from the same family as rich in 8:9, where Christ became poor so that the Corinthians might become rich. Verse 11 says what the riches are for: *all generosity*, *haplotēs* once more, the undivided heart of Lesson 2 and Lesson 12. God makes a church rich so that it can give with a whole heart, and the giving *ends in thanksgiving*.

2 Corinthians 9:12-15 – Where the Gift Lands

For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God (9:12). *Service* is *leitourgia*, a word used for priestly service in worship. Luke uses it of Zechariah's days of duty in the temple (Luke 1:23).[88] Corinth's money would fill a real gap in Jerusalem and rise to God as worship. Overflowing is *perisseuō* a third time.

Because of the proof provided by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedient confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone (9:13). *Proof* is the word for the *trial* of 8:2. Affliction proved Macedonia's generosity. Corinth's gift would prove Corinth's confession. This gift was traveling from Gentile churches to Jewish saints, and Paul knew it carried more than money (Romans 15:25-27). In Jerusalem it would show Gentiles whose confession of the gospel had turned into obedience.[89]

And as they pray on your behalf, they will have deep affection for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you (9:14). Corinth sends money, and Jerusalem sends prayer and longing for people most of them will never meet. Even that affection traces back to grace.

Paul ends the appeal with no request at all. *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!* (9:15). *Thanks* is *charis*, the same word that has meant *grace* all through chapters 8 and 9. *Indescribable* means something that cannot be told in full, and it appears nowhere else in the New Testament.[90] After two chapters describing gifts, he comes to one he cannot describe and thanks God for it.

Looking to Christ

A few days before the cross, some Greeks at the Passover festival asked Philip if they could see Jesus (John 12:20-22). Jesus answered by talking about seed.

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself. But if it dies, it produces much fruit (John 12:23-24).

Paul's farmer knew that seed kept in the barn stays safe. Jesus adds that it *remains by itself*. A grain that's kept stays one grain. It becomes a harvest only when it falls into the ground and dies. Jesus was speaking of Himself.

The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (12:25). Then His soul was troubled, and He said so. He could have asked to be spared that hour. Instead, He prayed, *Father, glorify your name* (12:27-28). 2 Corinthians 9 arrives at the same place, with a gift that leads people *to glorify God* (9:13).[91]

The harvest He promised was large. *As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself* (12:32). The Greeks who asked to see Him, and the Gentile churches of Macedonia and Achaia sending relief to Jerusalem, both belong to the *much fruit*.

Paul never names the indescribable gift. The word he chose for it, though, is the word Jesus used beside a well in Samaria: *If you knew the gift of God* (John 4:10). With 2 Corinthians 8:9 in view, the gift is Christ Himself, the grain that fell into the ground.

Whatever a church gives, it gives because He gave first.

Conclusion and Application

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 shows a congregation how love abounds:

- A gift is meant to be a blessing, decided in the heart ahead of time and given gladly, and God loves that kind of giver.
- The one who sows generously reaps generously, and the harvest is more grace to give again.
- God is able to make every grace overflow, with the same sufficiency that met Paul in his weakness.
- A gift meets real needs and overflows into thanksgiving and glory to God.
- Christ was the grain of wheat that died to produce much fruit, and His indescribable gift stands behind every gift a church gives.

That closes the quarter. Over thirteen weeks love has spoken with grace, spent its gifts, carried a thorn, welcomed a weaker brother, strengthened the next man in line, restored the fallen, seasoned its words, taken the lower place, taught the younger, put on Christ's character, held its footing, and opened its hands. Each time, God gave before He asked. *From him the whole body* grows (Ephesians 4:16).

Part One opened with *grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift* (Ephesians 4:7). The word for *gift* there is the word Paul uses for the indescribable gift of 9:15. The quarter began with Christ's gift given to each member. It ends with thanks for a gift too great to put into words.

The Introduction closed with a prayer: *And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone* (1 Thessalonians 3:12). *Overflow* there is *perisseuō*, as in 9:8. The prayer asked for love that overflows, and the promise says God is able to make every grace overflow. That's what *abounding in love* means: grace overflowing into a church, and out of it toward somebody else.

That leaves a few questions for you. What have you decided in your heart? Which lesson this quarter put a name in your mind, and what will love do about that person now that the class is over? And when you count what God has handed you, does it come out to thanksgiving?

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

For Thought and Reflection

1. Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-5. Why did Paul send the brothers ahead? What is the difference between a gift given as a *blessing* and one taken as an *extortion* (9:5)?

2. According to 9:8-11, what is the harvest of generous sowing? How do those verses guard against reading 9:6 as a promise of wealth?

3. Paul says each person should give *as he has decided in his heart* (9:7). What does deciding ahead of time do for a Christian's giving?

4. Paul rules out giving *reluctantly* and giving *out of compulsion*. Which of the two is the greater danger for you? How would you recognize it?

5. *God loves a cheerful giver*. Where does that cheerfulness come from? Read Romans 12:8. What else is to be done with cheerfulness?

6. List the five uses of *every*, *always*, and *everything* in 9:8. Which phrase do you most need to believe right now, and why?

7. Read 2 Corinthians 12:9 beside 9:8. How is the grace that was sufficient for Paul's thorn related to the grace that is sufficient for a church's generosity?

8. Besides relief for the poor, what did the gift produce according to 9:12-14? Who ends up giving thanks, and who ends up praying?

9. Read John 12:20-28. What does a grain of wheat that *remains by itself* picture? How does the death of Jesus answer the Greeks who wanted to see Him?

10. Look back over all thirteen lessons. Which one pressed hardest on a relationship in your own life? Write down one thing love will do about it this week.

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[82] *Hilaros*, "cheerful, glad," BDAG, s.v. ἱλαρός, occurs only at 2 Corinthians 9:7; the noun *hilarotēs* occurs only at Romans 12:8 (see Lesson 2, endnote 10). The *all* and *every* words of the paragraph are forms of *pas*: at 9:8, *pasan charin* (*every grace*), *en panti* (*in every way*), *pantote* (*always*), *pasan autarkeian* (*everything you need*), and *pan ergon agathon* (*every good work*); at 9:11, *en panti* (*in every way*) and *pasan haplotēta* (*all generosity*); at 9:13, *eis pantas* (*with everyone*).

[83] *Eulogia*, "blessing," and by extension "generous gift, bounty," BDAG, s.v. εὐλογία. It stands twice in 9:5 (*the generous gift you promised*; *ready as a gift*) and twice in 9:6 in the phrase *ep' eulogiais*, literally "on the basis of blessings," which the CSB renders *generously*. *Pleonexia*, "greediness, covetousness," BDAG, s.v. πλεονεξία. The *unnecessary* of 9:1 is *perisson*, from the same family as *perisseuō* in 9:8 and 9:12.

[84] *Proēirētai*, perfect tense of *proaireō*, "to choose deliberately, make up one's mind," BDAG, s.v. προαιρέω, its only New Testament occurrence. *Ek lypēs*, literally "out of grief," *lypē*, BDAG, s.v. λύπη; *ex anankēs*, "out of compulsion," *anankē*, BDAG, s.v. ἀνάγκη. The Greek Old Testament at Proverbs 22:8 adds a line absent from the Hebrew, *andra hilaron kai dotēn eulogei ho theos*, "God blesses a cheerful and giving man." Paul's form reads *hilaron gar dotēn agapa ho theos*, with *agapaō*, "loves," in place of *eulogeō*, "blesses."

[85] *Dynateō*, "to be able, be strong," BDAG, s.v. δυνατέω, occurs only at Romans 14:4, 2 Corinthians 9:8, and 2 Corinthians 13:3 (see Lesson 4, endnote 20). *Perisseuō*, "to be present in abundance, overflow, excel," BDAG, s.v. περισσεύω, appears twice in 9:8 (*overflow*, *excel*) and once in 9:12 (*overflowing*). It also stands at 8:2 (*overflowed*) and twice at 8:7 (*excel*), and at 1 Thessalonians 3:12 (*overflow*), the prayer that closed this study's Introduction.

[86] *Autarkeia*, "state of having what is adequate, sufficiency," and also "contentment," BDAG, s.v. αὐτάρκεια. The noun appears elsewhere in the New Testament only at 1 Timothy 6:6 (*contentment*); the adjective *autarkēs* stands at Philippians 4:11 (*content*). Both are compounded on the root of *arkeō*, "to be enough, be sufficient," the verb of 2 Corinthians 12:9 (see Lesson 3, endnote 14).

[87] The quotation is from Psalm 112:9 (111:9 in the Greek Old Testament). *Distributed freely* translates *eskorpisen*, "he scattered," from *skorpizō*, BDAG, s.v. σκορπίζω. Verse 10 draws on the Greek of Isaiah 55:10, *sperma tō speironti kai arton eis brōsin*, "seed to the sower and bread for food." The phrase *genēmata tēs dikaiosynēs*, *harvest of your righteousness*, also appears in the Greek of Hosea 10:12. *Ploutizomenoi*, "being enriched," BDAG, s.v. πλουτίζω, belongs to the family of *ploutos* and *ploutēsēte* at 8:2 and 8:9 (see Lesson 12, endnotes 75 and 80).

[88] *Leitourgia*, "service," especially of a priest, BDAG, s.v. λειτουργία. Besides Luke 1:23, Paul uses it at Philippians 2:17 and 2:30. The *needs* of 9:12 are *hysterēmata*, "lacks, shortfalls," BDAG, s.v. ὑστέρημα. *Proof* at 9:13 is *dokimē*, BDAG, s.v. δοκιμή, the *trial* of 8:2 (see Lesson 12, endnote 79). *Obedient confession* is literally "the submission of your confession," *hypotagē tēs homologias*.

[89] The phrase *with them and with everyone* translates *eis autous kai eis pantas*. Readers take *pantas* as all the saints in other places or as all people generally, and among churches of Christ the verse has a long history in discussion of what a congregation's collection may be used for. This lesson does not attempt to settle that question. Whatever the reach of the phrase, the verse names what the gift would make its receivers do: glorify God.

[90] *Epipothountōn*, "longing for, having deep affection for," from *epipotheō*, BDAG, s.v. ἐπιποθέω. *Hyperballousan*, "surpassing," from *hyperballō*, BDAG, s.v. ὑπερβάλλω, as at 2 Corinthians 3:10, Ephesians 1:19, and Ephesians 2:7. *Anekdiēgētos*, "indescribable," BDAG, s.v. ἀνεκδιήγητος, occurs only at 2 Corinthians 9:15. *Gift* is *dōrea*, BDAG, s.v. δωρεά, the noun of John 4:10 and Ephesians 4:7, the Part One epigraph.

[91] *Doxazō*, "to glorify," BDAG, s.v. δοξάζω, stands at John 12:23 and three times at 12:28, and at 2 Corinthians 9:13 (*they will glorify God*). The Greeks of John 12:20 are *Hellēnes*, Gentiles who had come up to worship at the festival.

EPILOGUE

What Love Keeps Doing

What does love do after the last lesson?

Do everything in love. — 1 Corinthians 16:14

Thirteen passages have shown love at work in real congregations. It spoke with grace. It put its gifts to work. It restored the fallen, welcomed the weak, held on when the times were unsettled, and gave to people it would never meet. Every one of those letters went to a church that would wake up the next morning with the same people and the same needs. The epilogue goes back to the chapter this quarter left alone on purpose, 1 Corinthians 13, and reads it with the last thirteen weeks in mind. It asks whose name fits every line. Then it sends you back to your congregation, where each part keeps doing its work after the class is over.

One passage: 1 Corinthians 13:4-13.

EPILOGUE

Read It Again

Do everything in love. — 1 Corinthians 16:14

In the introduction, I promised not to cover 1 Corinthians 13. This quarter would leave that chapter alone and study thirteen other passages instead—places in Paul's letters where the verbs of his most famous paragraph are put to work in a real congregation facing a real problem. Well, here we are. Thirteen texts are behind us, and the chapter set aside is still waiting. It's time to go back and read it.

The Chapter Sounds Different Now

Turn to 1 Corinthians 13 and read verses 4 through 7 slowly. Thirteen weeks ago those lines were familiar the way a wedding reading is familiar. They were lovely, and they were a little far away.

They shouldn't sound far away anymore.

Love is patient, love is kind (13:4). Colossians 3:12 hung patience among the garments a church wears over the long haul, and Lesson 10 said that by the fifth year with the same people, you'll need it more than any of the others. Kindness showed up in the first week, beside compassion and forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32).

Is not arrogant (13:4). Romans 12:3 asked every member for an honest measurement of what God had handed him. Philippians 2 set the mind of Christ against the quiet contest for the higher seat.

Does not keep a record of wrongs (13:5). Galatians 6 sent a spiritual brother after a man caught in wrongdoing, carrying gentleness with him and leaving the ledger at home.

Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth (13:6). Lesson 11 watched people perish because they refused *the love of the truth* (2 Thessalonians 2:10), while a shaken church held on to what it had been taught.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:7). That verse opened Part Three, and the lessons that followed showed what it costs to keep bearing and keep hoping when the times are unsettled and the money is short.

Paul's fifteen verbs belong to people you know now. That was the point of the quarter. Love in general is easy to admire from a distance. Love that has to be patient with the brother who tries you every week is the kind Paul was writing about. It's the kind all thirteen texts kept pressing on us.

Put a Name in the Verse

Here's an old way of reading this paragraph. Read verses 4 through 7 aloud, putting your name in every place Paul wrote *love*.

You won't get far. The sentence usually stops being true somewhere in verse 4, and if it survives that long, verse 5 finishes it off. That's an honest result. Don't hurry past it. Thirteen weeks on what love does have shown you where you fall short.

Then read the paragraph a second time with the name of Jesus.

Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant. This time the sentence holds all the way to the end of verse 7. It held at the basin in John 13, where He knelt at feet that belonged to Judas, and it held at the cross, where He made sure His mother would be cared for (John 19:26-27). Only one life fits every line of 1 Corinthians 13. It's His.

That second reading brings back the point the quarter started with: love is given before it's commanded. John says it in seven words: *We love because he first loved us* (1 John 4:19). A church that tries to manufacture the love of 1 Corinthians 13 by effort alone will stall somewhere in verse 4. The love has to be received from the One whose name fits every line, and then it has to be spent on somebody else.

What Remains

Paul ends the chapter by sorting out what lasts. Prophecies would come to an end, and tongues would cease, and knowledge would pass away (13:8). *Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love* (13:13).

A class is one of the things that ends. The last lesson is taught, the room empties, and the workbook gets set aside. Love is the thing on Paul's list that keeps going. Ephesians 4:16 says the body builds itself up *by the proper working of each individual part*, and that work goes on whether a class meets or not. It happens the morning after the last lesson, among the same people who sat in the same rows all quarter.

So, before this book closes, go back through it once more. Look at the answers written on paper, especially the ones that couldn't have been said aloud in a group. Lesson 13 asked for one thing love would do this week. Find what you wrote, and ask whether you've done it. If a lesson put a name in your mind, that person is still there. Pray for him by name. Then go do the thing love does.

Near the end of 1 Corinthians, after the instructions for the collection that would become the gift of 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 (16:1-4), Paul left the Corinthians with four words: *Do everything in love* (16:14). Read literally, the Greek says, "Let all your things be done in love." The verb is a present imperative. *Keep on doing it.*

Every one of the thirteen passages in this book fits inside that sentence. None of them asked for anything Christ hadn't already done.

He loved you first. Now do everything in love.