LESSON 12

Love in Generosity

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 8:9

When we love generously, we give ourselves to the Lord first, and the grace that opens our hands comes from the Lord who was rich and became poor for our sake.

Introduction

FOR YEARS PAUL GATHERED AN OFFERING FROM THE GENTILE CONGREGATIONS FOR THE POOR AMONG THE SAINTS IN JERUSALEM (ROMANS 15:26). He gave Corinth instructions for it in his first letter (1 Corinthians 16:1-4), and Corinth started well. Then it stalled. By the time Paul wrote 2 Corinthians 8, the Corinthians had been at it since *last year* (8:10), and the gift still wasn't finished. So Paul told them about the churches to their north.

Lesson 11 closed with an assignment: read the paragraph and notice where grace enters in verse 1 and where it lands in verse 9. It enters as *the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia*. It lands as *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Between those two verses the same Greek word shows up three more times, once translated *privilege* and twice as *act of grace*. That makes five times in nine verses.[73] Paul can't talk about money for long without talking about grace.

We'll follow Paul through the grace given in Macedonia (8:1-2), the Macedonians giving themselves (8:3-5), the test Paul sets for Corinth's love (8:6-8), and the grace the Corinthians already knew (8:9). Then we'll go to the cross, where the Lord gave away the last of what He had.

2 Corinthians 8:1-2 – Grace Given in Macedonia

Paul starts with what God did. *We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia.* Before Paul names a single gift, the Macedonians are on the receiving end. The generosity he's about to describe started as a gift to them.

Then verse 2 lays out their circumstances, and on paper they don't 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.* Affliction and poverty ought to produce a closed fist. In Macedonia they produced joy, and the joy and the poverty together spilled over into giving.

Thessalonica had lived this verse before. Paul once told that church it *welcomed the message with joy from the Holy Spirit*, and that it did so *in spite of severe persecution* (1 Thessalonians 1:6). Affliction and joy sit side by side in both letters.[74] Lesson 11 watched that church hold on under pressure. Here's what it was doing with its hands while it held on.

Paul's word for their poverty is the word for a beggar's want, and he adds that it went all the way down. His word for what overflowed is *wealth*, the ordinary word for riches.[75] They had almost nothing, and they gave richly.

The word for generosity is *haplotēs*, the word Romans 12:8 attached to giving back in Lesson 2. It means singleness before it means generosity. It describes a heart that doesn't split itself in two over whether to give. The Macedonians had very little, and they didn't give any of it half-heartedly.

2 Corinthians 8:3-5 – They Gave Themselves First

Paul was a witness to what happened next. *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* (8:3-4).

Several things in that sentence would have surprised Corinth. The Macedonians gave past what a careful budget would allow. They gave *of their own accord*, a word for something self-chosen, so nobody leaned on them.[76] And they begged. Paul had probably planned to spare these poor churches, or at least expected he'd have to ask. They asked him instead. *Earnestly* translates *paraklēsis*, the *encouragement* God had given Thessalonica in 2 Thessalonians 2:16. Here the same word describes the Macedonians pleading with an apostle to let them give.[77]

What they pleaded for was *the privilege*, and the word is *charis* again. They thought of giving as a grace somebody might grant them. Joined to it is *sharing*, *koinōnia*, the fellowship word. They wanted a share in helping believers in Jerusalem, most of whom they'd never meet.

Verse 5 explains all of it. *And not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will.* The money followed the person. Once you've handed yourself to the Lord, you've settled the big question, and the smaller questions about money tend to settle behind it. If you haven't, you'll argue over every dollar.

Where did the Macedonians learn to give like that? Verse 5 is the first answer. Verse 9 will give the deeper one.

2 Corinthians 8:6-8 – Testing the Genuineness of Love

Now Paul turns to Corinth. He *urged Titus*, using a form of that same word *paraklēsis*, to finish among them *this act of grace* he had started (8:6). Then he pays them a compliment. They excel in faith, speech, knowledge, diligence, and love (8:7). Paul is speaking to a gifted church, and he asks it to add one more thing to the list: *excel also in this act of grace.* You can grow in giving the way you grow in knowledge.

Diligence is *spoudē*, another word from Romans 12:8, where it belonged to leading. So three of the words Paul used there turn up in these eight verses: *paraklēsis*, *haplotēs*, and *spoudē*. The fourth, cheerfulness, shows up in next week's text.[78]

Verse 8 is careful. *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 had the authority to give an order. He chose to set Macedonia beside Corinth and let the comparison speak.

Testing comes from the same root as the *trial* of verse 2.[79] Affliction tested Macedonia, and what it found was generosity. Now Macedonia's example tests Corinth. *Genuineness* is a word used of a true-born child, the word Paul chose when he called Timothy *my true son in the faith* (1 Timothy 1:2). Paul wants to know whether Corinth's love is the real thing. Corinth spoke warmly about the brothers in Jerusalem and left the collection sitting unfinished. That kind of love has a question hanging over it. Before the chapter is over, Paul asks the Corinthians to show the churches proof of their love (8:24).

Love can be counted, at least in part. Your checkbook is one of the places it shows.

2 Corinthians 8:9 – The Grace You Already Know

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.

For you know. Paul tells the Corinthians nothing new. Every believer in Corinth already knew this grace, because it was the gospel that made them a church. Paul simply sets it in front of them while the collection is on the table.

Notice how the words of verse 2 come back turned around. In Macedonia, a beggar's poverty overflowed into wealth. In Christ, wealth went down into a beggar's poverty. *Became poor* is built from the same root as the *poverty* of verse 2.[80] Lesson 8 traced this descent in Philippians 2, where it was told in the language of glory and a servant's form. Here Paul tells it in the language of money, because money is the subject.

For your sake. The Corinthians were the reason He went down. *So that by his poverty you might become rich.* The Corinthians were already wealthy in everything that counts, and they had been made wealthy at His expense. If you belong to Christ, you're already rich. Giving is living like it.

That's the deeper answer to where Macedonia learned to give. The grace God gave the Macedonian churches in verse 1 comes from the grace of the Lord in verse 9.

Looking to Christ

Paul says the Corinthians know this grace. The Gospels show what they knew.

He was rich. On the night before the cross He prayed, *Now, Father, glorify me in your presence with that glory I had with you before the world existed* (John 17:5). That's where the descent began.

He became poor. When a scribe offered to follow Him anywhere, Jesus answered, *Foxes have dens, and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head* (Matthew 8:20). He lived on what others provided (Luke 8:3).

At the end the poverty was complete. *When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, a part for each soldier. They also took the tunic, which was seamless, woven in one piece from the top* (John 19:23). They threw lots for the last thing He owned. At the supper in John 13 He laid aside His outer clothing to wash His disciples' feet. At the cross the soldiers took it from Him and split it four ways.

Even then He kept giving. *When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple he loved standing there, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son"* (John 19:26). With nothing left to His name, He gave His mother a son and gave His disciple a mother.

Then came the last gift. *He gave up his spirit* (John 19:30). John's word means to hand over, and it's the one Paul uses when he says Christ *loved us and gave himself for us* (Ephesians 5:2), the text that anchored Lesson 1.[81] He had said no one would take His life from Him (John 10:18). He handed it over Himself.

This is the grace Corinth knew, and the grace Macedonia had been looking at. The Macedonians gave themselves first because Christ gave Himself first, and He did it for the church's sake. When you open your hand, you're passing along wealth you received from a man who died owning nothing.

Conclusion and Application

2 Corinthians 8:1-9 shows a congregation how love gives:

- Generosity begins as grace God gives to a church, before it's anything the church gives away.
- Affliction and poverty didn't close the Macedonians' hands. Joy and an undivided heart opened them.
- The Macedonians begged to share in the gift, because they had already given themselves to the Lord.
- Paul asked Corinth to excel in giving and treated an open hand as the test of genuine love.
- Christ was rich and became poor for the church's sake. He gave away the last of what He had at the cross and handed over His own life. Every Christian gift flows from that grace.

Have you given yourself to the Lord first, so that the smaller questions can follow? Where is your heart divided over giving? And whose need, near or far, could your hands reach this month?

For Thought and Reflection

1. Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8:10-11. What had Corinth begun, and what had happened since?

2. Paul names the grace of God before he names a single gift (8:1). How does starting with grace change the way you think about your own giving?

3. Verse 2 puts affliction and poverty beside joy and generosity. Where have you seen that combination in someone's life? What made it possible?

4. *Haplotēs* describes an undivided heart. What divides your heart when you're deciding whether to give?

5. The Macedonians *begged us earnestly for the privilege* (8:4). What's the difference between a church that has to be persuaded and a church that asks to be included? How does a congregation move from the first to the second?

6. Why does giving yourself *first to the Lord* (8:5) settle so many smaller questions about money?

7. Paul treats generosity as something a church can *excel* in (8:7). What would growth in giving look like for this congregation over the next few years?

8. Paul refused to make this a command and chose to test *the genuineness of your love* (8:8). Why might a command have worked against his purpose?

9. Read Philippians 2:5-8 beside 2 Corinthians 8:9. How does Paul use the same descent of Christ to make two different appeals?

10. Read John 19:23-30. What did Jesus still have to give when everything else had been taken from Him? How does that scene change what you think you have to give?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 13 – Conclusion: Abounding in Love, 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

2 Corinthians 8 showed grace given to Macedonia opening the hands of the poorest churches Paul knew. The final lesson follows the same appeal to its end. Paul talks about sowing and reaping, promises that God can supply everything a generous church needs, and then watches the gift turn into thanksgiving in Jerusalem. At the very end, he runs out of words for the grace behind it all. *Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!* 2 Corinthians 9:15. Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-15 before class. Watch for the fourth word from Romans 12:8, *cheerful*, and count how often the paragraph says *all* or *every*. Then follow the gift past Jerusalem to where it finally lands in verses 11-13.

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[73] *Charis*, BDAG, s.v. χάρις. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 the word appears at 8:1 (*the grace of God*), 8:4 (*the privilege*), 8:6 and 8:7 (*this act of grace*), and 8:9 (*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*). It appears five more times before the appeal closes, at 8:16, 8:19, 9:8, 9:14, and 9:15. At 8:16 and 9:15 the CSB renders it "thanks." At 8:1 the participle *dedomenēn*, "given," is perfect passive.

[74] 1 Thessalonians 1:6 reads *en thlipsei pollē meta charas*, literally "in much affliction with joy." 2 Corinthians 8:2 reads *en pollē dokimē thlipseōs hē perisseia tēs charas*, literally "in much testing of affliction the abundance of joy." *Thlipsis*, BDAG, s.v. θλῖψις. Philippi, another Macedonian church, had sent gifts for Paul's needs more than once while he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:15-16).

[75] *Ptōcheia*, "poverty," BDAG, s.v. πτωχεία, from *ptōchos*, the word for the beggar Lazarus at Luke 16:20. The phrase *kata bathous*, literally "down to the depth," stands behind the CSB's *extreme*. *Ploutos*, "wealth, riches," BDAG, s.v. πλοῦτος. *Haplotēs*, BDAG, s.v. ἁπλότης, appears at Romans 12:8 (see Lesson 2) and returns in the text of Lesson 13 at 2 Corinthians 9:11 and 9:13.

[76] *Authairetoi*, "of one's own accord," BDAG, s.v. αὐθαίρετος. The New Testament uses the word only here and at 8:17, where Titus goes to Corinth *of his own accord*.

[77] *Meta pollēs paraklēseōs deomenoi hēmōn*, literally "with much appeal begging us." *Paraklēsis*, BDAG, s.v. παράκλησις; see Lesson 11, endnote 69. Paul's verb at 8:6, *parakalesai*, "to urge," is the verb he prays for at 2 Thessalonians 2:17. The object of their begging is *tēn charin kai tēn koinōnian tēs diakonias*, "the grace and the fellowship of the ministry." *Koinōnia*, BDAG, s.v. κοινωνία. Paul uses the same noun for this collection at Romans 15:26, where the CSB renders it *contribution*.

[78] Romans 12:8 attaches *paraklēsis* ("exhortation"), *haplotēs* ("generosity"), *spoudē* ("diligence"), and *hilarotēs* ("cheerfulness") to four of its gifts. *Spoudē*, BDAG, s.v. σπουδή, appears in this chapter at 8:7, 8:8, and 8:16, where the CSB renders it *concern*. The adjective *hilaros* appears at 2 Corinthians 9:7. At 8:7 some manuscripts read "in our love for you," a variant the CSB notes.

[79] *Dokimazōn*, "testing, proving," BDAG, s.v. δοκιμάζω, shares its root with *dokimē*, "trial," at 8:2. *Gnēsion*, "genuine," BDAG, s.v. γνήσιος, describes a legitimate child, as at 1 Timothy 1:2. The "proof" of 8:24 is *endeixis*, BDAG, s.v. ἔνδειξις.

[80] *Plousios ōn*, "being rich," is a present participle. *Eptōcheusen*, "he became poor," BDAG, s.v. πτωχεύω, is the verb of the *ptōch-* family behind *ptōcheia* in 8:2 and occurs only here in the New Testament. *Hina hymeis tē ekeinou ptōcheia ploutēsēte*, "so that you by that one's poverty might become rich," brings back both nouns of 8:2. *Di' hymas*, "for your sake."

[81] *Paredōken to pneuma*, "he handed over the spirit," from *paradidōmi*, BDAG, s.v. παραδίδωμι, the verb behind the *traditions* of Lesson 11. Paul uses it of Christ giving Himself at Ephesians 5:2, Ephesians 5:25, and Galatians 2:20. The Macedonians' verb at 2 Corinthians 8:5 is the simpler *edōkan*, "they gave."