



# Living Generously

## STUDY GUIDE

# WEEK ONE – November 7

## “Sharing Comfort and Hope”



### 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (NIV)*

The Apostle Paul begins this letter to the Corinthian Jesus-followers with praise for comfort. Paul describes a time of suffering and difficulty while experiencing thoughts of giving up because of difficulties in ministry and life. He celebrates, however, that God has rescued him because of the relationship he has with the church. Paul celebrates the relationship and deliverance he now has.

As we consider what it means to live generously, we have an opportunity as the church to remember there are hurting people all around us—and we can be part of the journey of reconciliation through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. In fact, many of us experienced this ourselves from the church throughout various stages in our lives. Now is the time for us to consider offering the same grace that was shown to us.

### KEY POINTS

As we come to look at, think about, and get in touch with our scripture passage for today, there are some key points for us to consider:

## **1. We are comforted so we can comfort others.**

*2 Corinthians 1:1-4 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia: 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.*

Paul had history with the Church in Corinth. He had planted the church there and previously written to them at least three times. This letter is really the fourth letter Paul has sent them. The first three could be described as “open and frank” as Paul, their spiritual parent, addressed doctrinal and behavioral issues in the church. This letter was written with a slightly different tone. Throughout this correspondence, Paul reveals a great deal about his life and the struggles he faced while following Jesus. Paul understood—and he conveys in this letter—being a faithful disciple of Jesus does not give us a pass on hardship. After his initial apostolic greeting, Paul reminds the Corinthians the reason we receive comfort in the midst of life’s trials is not only to comfort us, but also for us to comfort others.

- Do you think we understand we receive comfort, not only for our sakes, but so we may comfort others as well?
- Can you share a time when you’ve had an opportunity to do so? What was that like?
- Can you share a time when someone else comforted you? What was that like?
- What do you hear God saying to you about comforting others? How might you do that in the coming week?

## **2. God’s grace in difficulty becomes a gift to be shared.**

*2 Corinthians 1:5-9 For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. 6 If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 7 And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. 8 We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*

Throughout this letter, Paul gives us a glimpse of his humanity and the difficulty he faced as an apostle (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 for a litany of Paul’s suffering). Paul shares his experiences to inspire his readers to persevere through their own time of pain and suffering. From his own experience, he writes to assure them, “For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And

*our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort.”* Paul wants us to know our scars and wounds become a source of comfort and compassion to those having similar experiences. As we allow them to see our scars, we can share the ways God’s grace has comforted us and given us hope. Someone once described this concept as learning to be “good stewards of our wounds”—learning to see God’s hand in the midst of our trials and difficulties and being open to what He is teaching us in the midst of them.

Paul then pulls back the veil of his apostleship and allows the Corinthians to see the pain and vulnerability of his humanity. This vulnerability becomes one of his strengths in sharing the Gospel between the writing of this letter and his execution in Rome. His honesty and candor about his hardships actually served to strengthen his faith and witness. We need to understand the same holds true for us. We need to come to that place where we both recognize God is at work in the midst of our hardships—and we understand it is for our own good. Our faith becomes sight by hearing the honest testimony of others to show us the way—and by sharing our honest testimony with others.

- Do you think we are “good stewards of our wounds”?
- When you have experienced hardships and how have you used them to grow in your faith?
- Have you had opportunities to use those times to share with others that they might find strength and comfort in the midst of their own hardships?
- What do you hear God saying to you?
- How can the group help you grow in this area?

### **3. Hope is a community act.**

*2 Corinthians 1:10,11 He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11 as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.*

The Christian life was never intended to be lived in secrecy or isolation. We need each other. There is no such thing as “Lone Ranger” Christians. As we share our honest testimonies with one another—the good, the bad, and the ugly—our faith increases and we pull together as the Body of Christ. Paul shares his sincere belief God will continue to pour out His grace and protection on Paul as the Corinthians continue to pray for him. He reminds us all the source of our hope is often the prayer, support, and encouragement of the community we call the church. Perhaps one of the greatest casualties of the pandemic has been the decline of hope—because we’ve been separated and isolated from one another. The truth is we need each other as a source of encouragement and as a source of comfort. Likewise, we need each other and our prayers as a source of hope.

- As you think about “living generously,” will you prayerfully consider joining Reynoldsburg UMC in the ministry of comfort and hope—by finding and developing relationships with other Jesus-followers?

- What steps do you need to take to make that happen?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning this?
- How can the group help bring this about?

## **RESPOND**

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

**H (Highlight):** What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

**E (Explain):** How would you explain the meaning of this passage to another?

**A (Apply):** How can you apply this passage to your relationship with God and your faith journey?

**R (Respond):** What response do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to make? What will be your response?

## WEEK TWO – November 14

### "Growing in Grace and Sharing Gifts"



#### 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

*And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 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." (NIV)*

With the lens of comfort and hope as our ministry call, the Apostle Paul then asks for overflowing joy and rich generosity as we continue to share in ministry together. This generosity and joy is demonstrated through acts of service, financial support, and the celebration of Titus—who is in ministry because of past generosity. Paul reminds us out of the poor and out of trials come the richness of faith and giving. In verse 7, Paul celebrates all that has been happening by encouraging the church to excel in giving—just as they have been excelling in everything else.

Paul then reminds us there is equality when all people excel in giving. Rather than the specific amount, it is the willingness to give and to excel in that willingness that matters. Reynoldsburg UMC has many reasons to celebrate with the numbers of changed lives and individuals who have gone on to ministry. We need to continue to be excited, excel in the ministry God has given us, and excel in giving so the ministry can continue.

#### KEY POINTS

As we come to look at, think about, and get in touch with our scripture passage for today, there are some key points for us to consider:

## **1. Followers of Jesus are connected with each other.**

*2 Corinthians 8:1,2 And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

In Paul's letter to the well-to-do church in Corinth, he mentions the poor and destitute Jesus-followers in Macedonia. Corinth was an ancient port and trade center in the eastern Roman Empire. With its location on the ancient trade routes and shipping lanes, it was somewhat protected from the threat of recession. Macedonia, on the other hand, was more of an agricultural region—prone to external factors that could hurt its economy. The Jesus-followers were going through a time of great hardship—during which the apostles put out an appeal to take an offering to be sent to help their brothers and sisters. The Macedonian churches, even though they were much poorer than the Corinthians, had given in astonishing and overwhelmingly generous ways—and Paul was using them as an example to “inspire” the Corinthians to do the same in proportion to their ability.

- Do you think we see and understand the connectedness we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ—both in our community and the world?
- How might we become more keenly aware of that connectedness?
- What steps do you sense God calling you/us to take?
- What might the group do to help facilitate this?

## **2. Our ability to live generously is not related to our bottom line.**

*2 Corinthians 8:3-5 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.*

The example of the Macedonians reminds us, first and foremost, generosity is a matter of the heart and not our financial bottom line. In comparison to the Corinthians, the gift from Macedonia might not have been as large when it came to the total—but because it flowed from their hearts, overflowing with love, they gave more than Paul every asked or imagined was possible. When a heart that belongs to Jesus is moved, the capacity to give is astonishing.

- What does it mean to you to give from the heart and not your “bottom line”?
- What are some of the obstacles that get in the way of giving from the heart?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning this?



### 3. We are to grow in every area of grace—including giving.

2 Corinthians 8:6-9 *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.*

When Jesus becomes our Savior and Lord, we begin to live our lives in response to the extravagant grace we've received. We come to understand the high price paid by Jesus for the grace we have received. As we mature, we grow in every area of our lives, faith, speech and conduct, wisdom and knowledge, earnestness and sincerity, and love and generosity. Paul is appealing to the portion of our spiritual development that is often the most difficult to bring under the leadership of Jesus. Giving presents a challenge because we tend to look at it externally. What might happen if we viewed being generous as a matter of the heart—understanding the more our heart is yielded to Jesus, the more open-handed we become. The irony is the more we have, the more difficult it is to grow in this area of grace.

- What does excelling in the grace of giving mean to you?
- Why do you think it's difficult for us to grow in the area of giving?
- Do you think we see this as one of the areas of our growing in grace? If not, why not?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning your giving?
- What steps do you need to begin to take?

### 4. Finish what you start.

2 Corinthians 8:10-12 *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.*

The Corinthian people were a work in progress. They had given generously the year before, and Paul is encouraging them to take the next step and finish what they started. He also encourages them to give in proportion to what they have—according to their capacity. Most people do not start with God's standard of giving (the tithe—or 10%), but tend to grow in this area of their lives—taking steps in that direction one at a time. The call is for us to grow into God's standard of giving and to finish what we have started by faith.



- What do you hear God saying to you concerning this?
- What is the beginning or continuing steps for you?

## 5. God doesn't ask for equal gifts, but equal sacrifice.

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."*

Paul is not trying to put the Corinthians in a bad financial position, but he is trying to put them in a good spiritual position—bringing them to the end of themselves where faith and trust begins, to take a step forward in generosity by faith, and to partner with God and other Jesus-followers to meet real needs. He does not ask for equal gifts, but is calling for equal sacrifice. He also gives them a promise we can take to the bank—God will honor their sacrifice and supply everything they need. The truth of the matter is, when we give what God asks, we cannot out give God.

- As you think about “living generously,” will you prayerfully consider joining Reynoldsburg UMC by asking God what it means for you to give generously—and then, in turn, to be willing to share your gifts?
- What steps need to be taken to make that happen?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning this?
- How can the group help bring this about?

## RESPOND

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

**H (Highlight):** What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

**E (Explain):** How would you explain the meaning of this passage to another?

**A (Apply):** How can you apply this passage to your relationship with God and your faith journey?

**R (Respond):** What response do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to make? What will be your response?

# WEEK THREE – November 21

## "Sharing Cheerfully and Faithfully"



### 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

*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! (NIV)*

The Apostle Paul gives one final challenge when it comes to giving—to sow generously in order that we may in turn reap generously. He calls us to be cheerful givers who excel in our willingness to give so that we might experience the fullness of God's grace. He reminds us this act of willingness and gift-giving is embodied perfectly in Jesus Christ—who invites us to obey and accompany Him in the ministry of sharing the Gospel.

Prior to this passage, Paul has continued to make his case—trying to inspire the Corinthian Jesus-followers to live and give generously. He's sending Titus to receive their offering, and he wants them to be ready. He drives his request home with these verses—which teach us how to live generously and faithfully.

### KEY POINTS

As we come to look at, think about, and get in touch with our scripture passage for today, there are some key points for us to consider:

#### 1. Sow generously with your life.

2 Corinthians 9:6 *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*

Farmers will tell you if you don't plant the crop, you have zero chance of reaping a harvest. If we sow grace sparingly, we will reap grace sparingly. The principal is simple—if we want to grow in grace, we need to sow grace—if we want to grow in faith, we need to sow faith—if we want to grow in our prayer lives, we need to sow prayer—and if we want to grow in generosity, we need to sow generously.

- What does it mean to you to sow generously?
- How have you experienced the blessing of sowing generously?
- What are some of the obstacles to sowing generously?
- What do you hear God saying to you?

## **2. Choose to be a cheerful giver.**

*2 Corinthians 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 not seeking to lay a guilt trip on anyone. Rather, he wants to make the point we are not to give under a sense of compulsion, but rather cheerfully—because we want to. This is a reminder our attitude is often a reflection of our hearts. When the subject of generosity is brought up, what stirs in your heart? Gratitude or selfishness? Joy or fear? Friends, all we have is a gift from God—and how we use it—every aspect of our lives—our time, our talent, our treasure—is our gift back to Him. We need to do so with purpose and forethought—as we've decided in our heart to give—and to give cheerfully.

- When the subject of generosity comes up, what stirs in your heart? Gratitude or reservation? Joy or fear?
- Do you think we take time to truly inventory all the gifts God gives us—not only material things, but our time, talent, His grace, mercy, and love?
- How might our response change if we did?
- What do you hear God saying to you?

## **3. God blesses generous living and supplies our needs.**

*2 Corinthians 9:8-11 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.*

We don't (and can't) understand God's economy. We've done the math, and 100% minus whatever percentage we give is less than 100%— we feel like we lose something in the equation. But in God's economy, 100% minus 10% almost always ends up being more than 100%. God promises consistently from the beginning of the scriptures to the end that, when we honor Him by living generously, He will do exceedingly, abundantly more than we can ever ask and imagine and give us everything we need.

- Do you think we understand the difference between our wants and our needs?
- Do you think we take the time to assess the difference when it comes to these two?
- How might our prayers, our faith, and our giving change if we did?

#### **4. Generosity inspires others.**

*2 Corinthians 9:12-15 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!*

Just as the generosity of the Macedonians inspired Paul to give thanks, the generosity of the Corinthians would result in prayers of thanksgiving from the recipients of their offering in Jerusalem. Those gifts would remind all who benefitted from them of the ultimate gift—the indescribable gift of Jesus. When we live generously, it inspires others to look at Jesus—the One who gives all good gifts, the One we love, serve, and for whom we live.

- As you think about “living generously,” will you prayerfully consider joining Reynoldsburg UMC by asking God what it means for you to sow generously and give cheerfully with the assurance God is faithful to supply what we need and will use our giving to inspire others to follow Jesus?
- What steps need to be taken to make that happen?
- What do you hear God saying to you concerning this?
- How can the group help bring this about?

#### **RESPOND**

As you think about this entire passage of scripture, respond to the following:

**H (Highlight):** What would you highlight in this passage? What do you hear God saying to you?

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**R (Respond):** What response do you sense the Holy Spirit is calling you to make? What will be your response?