



# GRACE CHURCH

## Christian Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Grace Church | 2.9.20

Good morning, Church. It's a joy to welcome you in the name of Jesus. If you are new to Grace Church, or if you are coming in this morning with some doubts and questions about what it means to follow Jesus as a Christian, I want you to know that the purpose of our church, the very reason we exist, is so that we can do our part to make the real Jesus known to you. You see, when the true Jesus is truly known, everything changes. Hearts change, eternal destinies change. So that is the mission of our church: to make Jesus and his good news clear and known in everything we do.

And this morning, I will admit that we have an interesting way of making Jesus known. We have already seen him through his Word as we have spoken it and heard it together, as we have confessed our failure to follow him closely, and as we have sung songs rooted in his word. But now we come to the part of our worship where we dig deeply into the Word of God which is written to reveal Jesus to us, and the topic is one is typically so shrouded in mystery and privacy and expectation that we might wonder what Jesus has to do with it all. You see, for the next several weeks we will be talking about money. More specifically, how all those who follow Jesus are called to be radically generous with their money.

So if you're new, or if you are wary of the way this sermon is already headed, I want to let you know that your pastors did not choose to preach this text as a disciplinary lesson. We aren't manipulating you with the Bible in order to give more. Rather, at our church we are committed to preaching the whole counsel of God. This is why the primary way we teach is through books of the Bible, verse by verse, not skipping or summarizing the stuff that is more difficult to hear. We have been walking through the beauty of the book of 2 Corinthians, and this is simply the next chapter and next verses. But because we believe wholeheartedly in the total sufficiency of God's word, we believe that there is so much joy and life and truth and light in every single part of this book. Call us crazy, but we are committed to the understanding that every single text points us to the glorious grace of God in Jesus Christ. So get ready to hear about him this morning.

The subtitle of our time in 2 Corinthians is "Paradox of Weakness", and once again it's fitting for our text this morning. To the Corinthian culture, who prized themselves in self-made status, who worshipped success and physical beauty and outward success and strength, who built statues of themselves to adorn their gardens, what could be more "weak" than free-flowing generosity? And to our culture, which likewise praises the self-made man and woman, isn't it true that we only value generosity as a way to celebrate ourselves? We may not be constructing statues of ourselves



in our own yards, but when we finally open up our savings accounts and we give of our financial resources, we are always tempted to feel like we *deserve* a statue. Don't pretend like that is not true: the cultural virtue of generosity is clouded by a cultural virtue of self-importance. This is what we might call *worldly* generosity. Wordly generosity sees giving primarily as an investment: if I am generous, than I will receive benefit from it in some way. Wordly generosity flows ultimately from a heart that has not understood the paradox of weakness inherent in the gospel: that when we are weak and unimportant, that is when we receive God-glorifying joy.

So this morning we will ask the question: if worldly generosity is ultimately about self-importance, what is Christian generosity? This morning, I've got seven marks of true Christian generosity, so get ready.

What does Christian generosity look like? Christian Generosity is all of Grace, not of self (1); flows from joy, not excess (2); gladly embraces sacrifice (3-5); shows spiritual maturity (6-7); acts out the genuine Gospel (8-9); is proportionate to the size of our hearts, not the size of our wallets (10-12); and provides for the needs of the church (13-15).

Let's get some context for what we are getting into here. Just last week we learned of Paul's comfort and joy in hearing of the Corinthians response to what is called his "severe letter". He sent them a harsh letter calling for them to repent and be reconciled, and they responded with what he called "godly grief", a sorrow for sin that leads to repentance and ultimately to comfort for everyone involved. Paul ends chapter 7 with a note of joy in **verse 7:16**. He now has "complete confidence" in them, he says. And while Paul is overjoyed to know about their godly grief, because it shows evidence of their salvation and acceptance of the gospel, he knows there is still work to do in the heart of the Corinthians. Although he is not *worried* about them in the same way as before he received good news from Titus about their repentance, he is still concerned for their wellbeing. He is confident in them, but he wants to build their confidence further. You could say that how they responded to his severe letter is the first "test" that Paul was giving the Corinthians. He wrote not so they could impress him by their repentance and therefore their passing of the "test", but for their own benefit. Remember in **7:12**, he wants them to receive the joy and comfort that comes from repentance. So their first test was if they would repent when their sin was called out. They passed that test, for their own benefit and confidence in the sight of God.

But in our text we will see Paul begin to urge the Corinthians towards a second "test". We see evidence of this in **verse 8**. That word for "prove" there is also commonly translated as "test". Paul wants the Corinthians to prove, by way of a test, that their love is genuine. Again, not so that they can please Paul as they are his pet project, but primarily so they can benefit from this test and grow in their own faith and Godliness. After all, this is the same word used by the apostle James in James 1:7; "for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." Paul is testing the Corinthians again so that they can produce in themselves steadfast faithfulness.



And what is Paul's test? He wants them to model generosity. You see, Paul has been adamant with the Corinthians before about the need for generosity, particularly to the church in Jerusalem. In his first letter to the Corinthians, we hear of his desire for them in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3.

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

Paul has very clear expectations of the church in Corinth. In order to help churches in financial need, he wants them to set aside money every single week until he comes, that way when he arrives he can send the money straight away instead of waiting for it to be collected. Now, since this was written to the Corinthians, a lot has happened. Paul was delayed in his coming, and he had to send that second letter, the lost "severe" letter. He does not want to visit until he can see how the letter is received, so he has not had the opportunity to come to Corinth and collect the offering for Jerusalem. So here in our text, he is reminding the Corinthians, gently, that he is coming soon and their offering should be ready. Now that they are reconciled with Paul, they should not neglect this test of their faith that will further prove their genuineness and steadfastness. But instead of commanding them harshly, Paul is much more gentle. He knows their relationship still takes care and trust, so he doesn't rebuke them harshly. Instead he gives them an example to follow and encourages them to take note.

So now we can see what that example is. Paul appeals first to the churches in Macedonia, a model of Christian generosity. In doing so, he shows us first that...

## **Christian Generosity...**

### **is all of Grace, not of self (1)**

Where does Christian generosity come from? Our text tells us clearly in **verse 1**. Christian generosity is *given*. It's a gift of grace from God. The word "grace" occurs five times in our passage, signifying its importance in Paul's argument here. Before the Macedonians could ever reach into their hearts to give, they must receive the grace of God to give in the first place. What this is showing us is that Christian generosity is never self-generating. Have you ever heard of or received a very generous gift and thought: "I wonder why they would give that"? Generosity oftentimes doesn't make sense. And I'm assuming you've heard this phrase as an answer the question of "why would someone give": "they gave out of the goodness of their heart".

It sounds nice, like a good answer to the "why" of generosity. But what it does is it implies that there is some inherent pure goodness deep inside people, that if they can just reach down deep and give from *that*, then their generosity will be truly pure. But again, what this does is places far too much value on ourselves. In attempting to show the church in Rome the depth of their



rebellion against God, Paul quotes Psalm 14 when he reminds them: “No one is righteous, no not one”. When approached by a wealthy man seeking justification, Jesus asks him why he calls him good? He says “no one is good except God alone”.

You see, worldly generosity attributes itself to the goodness of man’s heart. Not so with Christian generosity. Christian generosity is a gift from the grace of God, meant to point back to its source. We give freely of our resources not so that it can point to our goodness, but to God’s goodness. Christian generosity doesn’t arise from moral uprightness, it emerges as the grace of God works through the hearts of his people and compels them to give freely of what they have been given. Next time you are tempted to get credit for your act of generosity, remember that. The grace of God is freely given in Christ, never cheapen it by assuming that any ounce of goodness in you comes from anywhere else than Him.

## **flows from joy, not excess (2)**

**Read verse 2.** What do we know about the Macedonians? Well, we know primarily Paul is talking about the churches of Thessolonica, Phillipi, and Berea. And what else do we know from this verse? They are in some sort of severe affliction, perhaps some sort of persecution. Life is not all roses for them right now. And what other hints do we get? Paul speaks of severe affliction, but also extreme poverty. The word for “extreme” poverty that Paul uses is the same word used to talk of the “depth” of something. Paul is saying that the poverty of the Macedonians is deep. Their budgets aren’t just tight, they are wondering where they will receive their next meal. And their poverty contributed to their affliction, as they were treated as outsiders and radicals, cast off by society with no opportunity to ascend.

So who might the Corinthians assume would be the example of giving? If they looked at the map of their world, they might have circled the grandest cities, full of prosperity. Perhaps they would have circled their own: Corinth was known as a city where anyone could prosper. Surely these would be the cities where the giving would flow the freest? And this is exactly how we think too. The ones with excess give the most. Hasn’t God just set it up this way? But again, we are looking through the lens of the world to give us our definition of generosity. We think: the more wealthy, the more opportunity to be generous. With wealth comes less fear, less worry, less stress over money, and therefore more generosity. But the Macedonians have found the secret to Christian generosity, and it isn’t found in their excess.

Look where their generosity flows from. It’s a paradox. It was actually their affliction and their poverty that gave them the opportunity for paradoxical joy. They rejoiced in their affliction and in their poverty. Why? Because everyone expects rich people to be generous. But no one expects poor people to be generous. They knew they had a unique opportunity to bring glory to God, to showcase to the world just how radical they were, to showcase the depth of Christian generosity. They rejoiced in their poverty, because they knew God was using it to stir within them a deep well of generosity. Imagine the Macedonians, wondering if they will have food for the day, still setting



aside part of what they had for the church in Jerusalem. As they did so, their bellies might have been hungrier, but their hearts were fuller. Their joy was complete.

And how does Paul describe the gifts of the Macedonians in **verse 2**? He says that their joy in their poverty overflowed into a “wealth of generosity”. Now, I don’t know how much the Macedonians gave, but my assumption is that if they were in extreme poverty, they didn’t give much. It would most likely be hard to describe it as “a wealth of generosity”. But that’s exactly what Paul does. You see, Christian generosity runs deepest when it overflows from a heart of joy. If you only give when life is treating you right, when you have excess, then you may give *more* monetarily, but you will actually give *less* wealth. Christian generosity comes from joy, not excess.

### **gladly embraces sacrifice (3-5)**

It’s wonder enough that the Macedonians gave anything in the midst of their poor financial situation. But their example does not stop there. Look at what Paul says in **verse 3**. Not only did the Macedonians give according to what they could give, which would have been sacrifice enough, they gave *beyond* their means, meaning they gave more than anyone would expect or advise or recommend. Paul makes it known to the Corinthians that the Macedonians did this as well of their own accord, and in verse 5 he tells us it is not something he expected of them. IN other words, we could expect Paul to nearly dissuade the Macedonians to give too much, because of their extreme poverty. But they will not be dissuaded. Look at **verse 4**. Based on what we know about the Macedonians situation, it seems logical that they would listen to conventional wisdom. If someone is telling them they don’t have to give more, most people listen. But the Macedonians know somethingL they know the honor of sacrifice. The word here in verse 4 for “favor” is the word also for grace or gratitude. The Macedonians know that sacrifice is the way by which God gets glory, and they are all for it. Paul should be the one begging for money, but instead the Macedonians are the ones begging Paul. What a reversal!

One pastor calls Christian generosity, “The act of living with holes in our pockets for Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> This is the Macedonians. Here pockets may seem empty already, but whatever they have is pouring out of them, all for the sake of Christ. Why would the Macedonians run headlong into sacrificial giving? Is it simply their pride? Well, I think we see the answer in **verse 5**. The Macedonians know that their giving of their resources is not just for the body of Christ. They aren’t doing it to gain approval of man. They give themselves first to the Lord, their sacrifice is in the sight of God. But this does not mean that their sacrifice is empty of ritualistic. They are not burning their money religiously simply as a display of their own faithfulness. They know that it is the will of God that as they give themselves to God through their generosity, they are also giving themselves to the benefit of others.

As Jesus poured out his life for sinners and outcasts, the religious leaders mocked him. But what did Jesus say in Matthew 9? “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are

---

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Deyoung, preaching at University Reformed Church, Sep. 28, 2008.



sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." The Macedonians are able to gladly beg for the opportunity to sacrifice, because they know that as they give everything they can over to God, they are living mercifully for sinners in need of the good news of Jesus.

What would it look like to be a church that not only accepts sacrifice when necessary, but gladly pursues it? What else does Paul say to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 6? He reminds them: "you are not your own, you were bought with a price." Church, you were bought with a price of willing sacrifice by the blood of Christ. If we are not our own, what are we holding onto to? What is stopping us from truly embracing sacrifice? Will we be timid givers, of resources, of time, or will we give sacrificially?

### **shows spiritual maturity (6-8)**

Where does Christian generosity fit in with the Corinthians? Well, it's clear from verse **6** that Paul wants the example of the Macedonians to be carried forward by the Corinthians too. Apparently the Corinthians had already started to gather money for a collection, but had hit a few roadblocks. Paul wants Titus to act as a spiritual advisor and shepherd in leading them to complete what they had started. Why is it so important the Corinthians showcase this kind of generosity? Paul knows that this generosity will further confirm in the Corinthians hearts just how far they had come.

Corinth is not a generous city. It's a city focused on success and boasting, remember? So for the Corinthians to truly live with Christian generosity and sacrifice, is not an easy task. It showcases more than almost anything their Christian maturity. Paul says as much in **verse 7**. Here Paul is including generosity alongside other gifts and fruits of the Spirit. It draws to mind what he tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:4-7, where he tells them:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Apparently there were some spiritual gifts that the Corinthians had excelled at, particularly in understanding the Word of God and the knowledge of God. They have done a great job grasping the truths of the gospel, but have they let those truths sink down to their hearts, into the places where their Corinthian pride sits? For the Corinthians, and for us, it's not enough to have earnestness and knowledge of the truth, we must showcase action through our generosity. And when we do, it acts as a marker that our love and our zeal for truth is in fact genuine. See **verse 8**.

So if you are looking for assurance in your growth in Godliness, look no further than the amount of resources you budget for giving. The heart that has truly grasped the truth of God's grace is a heart wide open to Christian generosity.



## acts out the genuine Gospel (9)

The reason for this is because, as Paul argues, no spiritual gift or fruit or discipline is not separated from the gospel of Christ. Generosity is not different. The motive for generosity sits at the heart of the true gospel. Look at **verse 8** again. Paul says he does not “command” them. Why? Well, I believe he wants to be gentle with them, as their relationship is still mending. But more than that, he knows that if he twists the Corinthians arms into giving, they will have missed the point. Christian generosity is not driven by commands. What does Paul say it is driven by in this verse? It’s driven by *love*. Their generosity will show that they have love in their hearts.

And what is this love for? Clearly, this is a love not only for the people of God, but for GOD himself. Christian generosity is fueled primarily by a love for Christ and a desire to act out and display and model and show the love of Christ. See how Paul connects this in **verse 9**. What does he say first? He reminds the Corinthians, “you know this story, this gospel, this good news”. This is a gospel of divine generosity.

And it starts with an act of genuine love. We are not commanded to give any more than Christ was commanded. See what Jesus say about his act of generous love in John 10:17-18,

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

He gave himself willingly and therefore genuinely. So let me remind what happened in the person and work of Christ, as Paul reminds the Corinthians. First, Christ was rich with the riches of heaven. These riches are not just confined to his possessions, but exist in his very person. Paul calls him in Ephesians “rich in mercy”, and in Romans speaks of his “riches of kindness and patience”. But I want to turn your attention to one particular passage, Colossians 2:2-3. After just exposing the preeminence and pre-existence of Christ, Paul makes this audacious claim, praying that his churches would “be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” You see, you cannot fathom the riches of Christ, because if you were to measure them you would be looking into the depth of God’s eternal mystery. We measure riches in material wealth, he measures it in his unsearchable power and authority. Christ is rich beyond compare because he is the secret to seeing and knowing an eternal GOD.

And yet, the mystery became a man. The rich became poor. By taking on human form in the incarnation, Jesus showed just how low he could go. It’s not just materially, either, although Jesus was not materially rich on earth by any means. In becoming man, he let go of his status. Not with the Father, of course. But he became poor in the sense that he was unknown for most of his life, misrepresented for all of it, mistaken, willing to be misunderstood and persecuted for things he did not do. More than becoming poor in wealth, he became poor in spirit. And on the cross, he



became the poorest. As he bore the sins of the world, he truly became one from whom men hide their face. The Father turned his back on him there, because in that moment the dark poverty of sin swallowed up the riches of his mystery. But his poverty had a purpose. His death was an unbreakable investment in your eternal future. He was buried without a penny to his name, but all it was was the means to his resurrection. And in his resurrection, he lived so that all those poor sinners who turn their back on their sin and turn toward him by faith might become sons of God, heirs with Christ, those for whom eternity is not a big enough word to count their inheritance. He became sin so that in him the children of God might be clothed in his rich robes of righteousness and inherit all the land of eternity.

That gospel truth is the driving force behind genuine christian generosity. When we live with holes in our pockets for Jesus, we act of the mystery of the gospel and make Jesus known. There is no greater motivation than that, and only Christian generosity has that kind of power. A simple act of true generosity can pull someone into the story of grace.

### **is proportionate to the content of our hearts, not the size of our wallets (10-12)**

Paul continues, aiming to show the Corinthians that their desire is not enough. **See verse 10-11.** He wants to make sure that they are not just promisers, but doers. What good is generosity promised if it is not shown? Christ did not just promise to empty himself, he actually did it. And we see too how this action is to take place in **verse 12.** What Paul means by this is that what is pleasing to God is not the *amount* of their gift, as if they are called to give what they do not have, but the *heart* behind their gift. Mainly, he wants them to be ready when he comes, and not to delay. Let their passion for generosity be matched with their doing it.

This concern that Paul is addressing is often the largest roadblock to Christian generosity. People say: “will my gift be acceptable to God, even when it is small?” And the answer to this question is an undeniable yes. No matter the size of the generosity, the sincerity of the generosity overflows into true wealth that is pleasing to God. This was very convicting to me personally. I have my giving budgeted out, I have it on auto-pay, and I think I give generously according to my income. And 90% of the time, that is satisfactory to me. I judge my faithfulness by the amount, not by the heart. When I give more, I feel better about myself. And in doing so I forget to worship. But that is not the mark of Christian generosity. Our faithfulness is measured by our willingness to take up the hard work of giving, not the amount of the check that is given.

### **provides for the needs of the church (13-15)**

Here we come to our last mark of Christian generosity. Notice with me in **verses 13-15** just how this is supposed to work. Unless the Corinthians are tempted to believe that Paul just wants them to be miserable and poor for the sake of others, he reminds them that generosity is meant to be the backbone of Christian community. He quotes from the Old Testament to show how God





provided for the Israelites in the wilderness in a way where no one lacked or had excess. And so we learn exactly where our generosity is primarily aimed: to the benefit of the body of Christ.

Friends, when Christ came and lived perfectly and bled on the cross, he did it for his people. For his church, his body, his bride. His generosity was for their sake. And so we model him. I'm not saying you can't give to organizations or charities outside the church. But what I am saying is, be wise. The way God has set this whole thing up is that we care for one another. Do not neglect the brother or sister in front of you who is in need for the idealism of a particular cause, no matter how worthy the cause is. The world will know us by our love for one another, Jesus says.

And so today we have a unique opportunity to prepare our hearts to help one of our own in need. You all know of the Corona Virus in China, I am sure. Well, most of you are also aware that we have members of our church, Tyler and Tara Clifton, in full time missionary ministry in the area close to where the virus is most potent. They let us know this week that they are safe, and by God's providence were already out of the area. They are now relocated at least for a few months in South East Asia, and they need our help. Their team is unprepared financially for their emergency stay abroad, and needs funds to help support them while they are there. They have reached out to ask us for help. So here is what I would ask: this week we have opened a fund where you can give online. You can also drop a check in our giving boxes and simply note "Cliftons" on it. But I also want you to prepare for next week as well. Don't give haphazardly. Go home, think through your resources, and give generously and thoughtfully. Discuss it, plan it out. Sacrifice. And then come back next week and give.

God has made us rich in Christ. Let's showcase our genuine faith by caring for one another.

