

The Grace That Comes from Giving

by Bayless Conley

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Are you ready for the Word? Alright. I was coming back probably 45-46 years ago from I think I'd been in Laguna Beach, and I was driving up MacArthur Boulevard from Pacific Coast Highway. As you drive up MacArthur Boulevard now, there's nothing but ultra-expensive communities on both sides of the road. It's built up. It's a very posh and desirable area, but 45-46 years ago, there was nothing there.

It was a two-lane road that had no streetlights. It just wound through the hills in the dark, nothing there. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and the water pump on my truck went out. I coast to the side of the road, and I'm thinking, "You got to be kidding me." I'm sitting in the dark, and I was a fairly new Christian, and I remember praying. I said, "Lord, I don't believe that You would leave me sitting here like this." Then I said to Him, and I still remember the conversation. I said, "Lord, if our roles were reversed right now, I'd help You."

I no sooner said that and two headlights pulled up behind my truck. A guy gets out. I'm still sitting in the cab of my truck. I roll the window down. He walks up, says, "Are you a Christian?" I said, "Yes." He said, "God sent me here to help you." I said, "Look, I think the water pumps out on my truck." He says, "You're not going to get much help this time of night." He says, "I'll tell you what. If you want, you can come to my place, crash on the couch, and just get your truck sorted out tomorrow." I said, "Sure." We go to his place, and I think we ate leftover pizza and then sat down. We talked about Jesus till about 3:00 in the morning. And I still remember he played me Phil Keaggy's latest album. It's called, What A Day. Now, if you want to date this, just look it up when that album came out.

About 3:00 in the morning, he says, "Look, Bayless, I got to get to bed. I got to get up at 5:00 AM to go to work. It's in two hours." He said, "I'll tell you what, just sleep as long as you need to, use the phone over there and get your truck sorted, and then just let yourself out." I said, "Okay." I woke up; he was gone. He'd gone off to work, and I made the calls, got it sorted out with my truck, and let myself out.

The generosity of that brother and just the overflowing grace and the joy that was on him affected me from that encounter. It literally marked me to the point that today, almost 50 years on, I'm still talking about it. The Apostle Paul was marked in a similar way by the overflowing, abundant generosity, and grace that flowed from, and was upon a particular group of believers.

They were the believers from the City of Philippi. Paul had gone there, evangelized to Philippi, won people to Christ, and established a church. It was significant for a lot of reasons. Philippi was named after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great. That city commanded the road. It was a Roman colony at the time, but it commanded the road between Asia and Europe, and the people that he won to Christ there were the very first European converts.

We find the story of when Paul went to the city of Philippi. It's recorded in Acts 16. I'm going to read a few verses from there. It gives details of what happened. Then when we read the book of Philippians, the people we're going to talk about, the book of Philippians was written to them.

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The book of Philippians is connected to Acts 16. Then as well, Paul writes to the Corinthian church. And he's trying to stir them up, challenge them, and encourage them by the example of the Philippians. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, he talks about this grace of God upon them and the generosity that flowed from these Philippian Christians.

I want to start by reading a bit of the story from Acts 16. And then I'm going to go back and forth between the book of Philippians and what Paul said about everything that happened in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Everybody okay with that? Even if you're not, I'm going to do it. So, you may as well just be kind and shake your head "yes." All right. Acts 16, beginning in verses 6-10 NKJV,

⁶ Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. ⁷ After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. ⁸ So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

A couple of things here, first, they weren't just idly sitting by saying, "Okay, God, guide me." Notice they were active. God is drawn to activity. God is drawn to motion. They're trying to go to this place. The Holy Spirit says, "No." They're trying to go to this place. They're prayerfully and actively seeking out the plan of God and the purpose of God. Then God sent direction to them. You may be sitting here today, "I just don't know what to do." Alright, are you moving at all? Are you endeavoring to find the will of God? Are you seeking God? Are you praying and saying, "God, what about this direction?" Or "What about that?" God will lead you, but you need to do something. These folks that were here in Macedonia, the first stop that Paul made was a major city of Macedonia that I mentioned. It was the city of Philippi. They ended up helping a group of people from vastly different backgrounds and circumstances.

Now, when these guys from Macedonia—Think about it, in the vision, they're pleading, everyone say "pleading." They're pleading, "Come and help us. Please come and help us." Pleading for help. We surmise that God wanted us to go preach the gospel to them. The best way you can help people is to get the gospel to them. There's no greater help that we can give to individuals other than the gospel.

I was at the store yesterday. I picked up a few things, and as I'm driving out of the parking lot, there's a guy sitting on the corner of the store on the road. He's got a sign up; it just said, "Hungry." I pulled my car over to the side of the road and got some of the groceries out that I just got. Then I went and gave him some groceries, but I talked to him about Jesus. Now, the groceries were fine, but the greatest help I gave him was speaking the name of Jesus to him.

They go into Macedonia, this first city called Philippi, and they preach the gospel. The first one to get saved down by the riverside was a rich woman named Lydia. She was a seller of purple, an extremely lucrative business. It was a color that was worn by royalty. She was from the city of Thyatira. She was well traveled. She was wealthy. She had a big home. She had a staff. She had servants, but she was empty inside.

She's the kind of person that a lot of people would look at her and think, "Man, she's wealthy. She's got this big house. She travels all over the known world. She's got all this stuff. Man,

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I want to be her. I want to be like her.” She was empty inside. There was something that all of the money, and the travel, and the new locations, and the connections never brought her. Paul preached the gospel to her. She believed, she was baptized, and she found that crazy missing piece of the puzzle, His name is Jesus. Then her whole family, her whole team, all the staff, they all believed. They’re saved, and they get baptized. They would have just been pretty normal people, not super rich, not super poor, people whose needs were adequately met. They weren’t villainous. They’re just normal people, like most of the people in the world. People that God loves, for whom Christ died. People that heaven treasures. People that heaven wants, and they all came into the Kingdom.

Then there was a slave girl. The Bible says she was possessed by an evil spirit. She was able to tell the future. She would read fortunes, but to her owners, she was nothing but a commodity. Just a thing to be wrung out and used. A way for them to get ahead, a way for them to make a buck. The Apostle Paul cast the evil spirit out of this young slave girl. She knew what it was to be gripped with dark demonic powers. She knew what it was to have an evil spirit controlling her, and she was set free. I’m quite sure that she became a part of that believing community.

Now, her masters, her owners, were really upset because now their means of profit is gone. They dragged Paul and Silas into the city square. They accuse them of all sorts of things, and they’re savagely beaten. Then the elders of the city take them to the jailer and say, “Look, put them in the innermost prison. Make them safe.” Then comes our next character in the story. It is that Philippian jailer; he would have been a grizzled ex-Roman soldier.

A man that had seen enough battles and lived through enough carnage that he was calloused and he was hard. He took these men that had been beaten severely, and he locks their feet in the stalks, in this stinking, inner, dark prison, and does not tend to their wounds. You know what he does next? He goes to sleep. Uncompassionate. Uncaring. Unmoved by human suffering. The only thing that woke him up was an earthquake.

He thought all the prisoners were gone. He was going to kill himself because he’s responsible. You know the story. Paul says, “Don’t kill yourself. We’re here.” He comes trembling, falls down, and said, “What do I need to do to be saved?” Paul said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you and your household will be saved.” Here’s this hardened, calloused, old Roman soldier now brings Paul and Silas to his home to have a meal with his family. He lovingly tends to their wounds, and his family would have seen such a radical change in him.

As it happens so many times, one member of the family gets saved, and the dominoes start to fall. The rest of his family were swept into the Kingdom. They all believed in Jesus, and they were all baptized. Now, these people that we’re talking about, Lydia, her household, this little demon-possessed girl, the jailer, and his household, they would have made up, they were the fledgling members of this church in Philippi. When you read the book of Philippians, they’re the ones that the book was written to.

Now, certainly, the church grew because in the book of Philippians, the bishops and the deacons are mentioned. There’s several leaders in the church mentioned by name, but the people that I just talked about are the kernel from which everything else grew. They were the start of everything. Now, they were the ones represented in Paul’s vision by the man of Macedonia that was pleading, “Come to Macedonia and help us.” It was a representation of them.

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They said, “Come and help us.” Paul establishes a church there, and then he moves on from there, and goes to Thessalonica. Then he goes to Berea, and other cities in Macedonia. He goes to Athens and then to Corinth, and he preaches the gospel in all of those places. Where did he get the resources to go to all of these other cities and preach? From this little fledgling church in Philippi, from the jailer and his family, from Lydia, her family, her staff, from that little girl that had been set free from demon powers. Listen to what Paul says, Philippians 4:15-16 NLT. He said,

¹⁵ As you know, you Philippians were the only ones who gave me financial help when I first brought you the Good News and then traveled on from Macedonia. No other church did this. ¹⁶ Even when I was in Thessalonica you sent help more than once.

Writing to the Corinthians, Paul says this about them in Corinthians 11:9a NLT. He says,

⁹ And when I was with you and didn't have enough to live on, I did not become a financial burden to anyone. For the brothers who came from Macedonia brought me all that I needed.

In fact, Philippians 1:5 NLT listen to this. It's beautiful, Paul is writing to this church, the ones we just talked about. He says this,

⁵ For you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.

From that day on the riverside, when God opened Lydia's heart, and she believed. From the day that her family was saved and baptized. From the time that jailer and his family got saved. He said, “From that day, you've been partners with me and supporting me in this gospel work.” When he wrote that to them, it was ten years later. Ten years of consistent, generous support for the gospel. In fact, Paul, in trying to inspire the Corinthians records this fact about the attitude of the Macedonians. And listen, this is amazing. 2 Corinthians 8:4 GNT he said,

⁴ They begged us and pleaded for the privilege of having a part in helping God's people in Judea.

“They begged us and pleaded for the privilege to help.” Now think about it. Here's this group of people. This is how it starts. Come and help us. That might be you today. You're in need of help. Your life is upside down. Your marriage is coming apart at the seams. You're in trouble physically. Your kids have gone haywire. You've got financial woes.

Listen, God wants to help you. He has help for you. If you're distressed, He has peace for you. If you are in the dark and need direction, He has direction and wisdom for you. If you are sick, He has healing for you. If you are oppressed, God has freedom for your mind. If you are lost, He has salvation for you. God has help for you. If that's where you are, don't feel bad about it. You may be in the house today, you may be listening, and that's you. It's like, “Somebody help me. I need help.” That's okay. God will help you.

Here are these Philippians, they're crying for help. They're pleading for help. Now they've moved, and they're pleading, “Please let us help someone else. Please let us be of help. We want the privilege of helping someone else.” How do you move from help me to please let me help? That's where God wants to take every one of us. It's okay if you are in the help me stage, but God wants to bring you from help me to let me help.

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God wants to take you from being saved, to bringing the message to someone else. God wants to take you from being lifted, to lifting someone else. God wants to take you from being broken and shattered to pieces, to being His hand of love and blessing and restoration into the life of someone else. We need to move from help me, to please let me help.

Again, it's all right if you're in the help me category right now. You need to realize, dear friend, that God wants to bring you to the, please let me help category. He wants to make you into that kind of a person. How did this transformation take place? How did they move from please help us to please let us help?

First, the transformation took place because the moment they embraced Christ, they were all in. It wasn't just a one-day-a-week commitment for them. Listen, Christianity doesn't work if you just do it on Sundays. It's not the way that it works at all. They were all in. Paul writes this about them, 2 Corinthians 8:5 GNT. He said,

⁵ It was more than we could have hoped for! First they gave themselves to the Lord; and then, by God's will they gave themselves to us as well.

They sold out to God. Then God directed them to support Paul and his ministry. Listen, when our hearts are fully His, our time, our treasures, and our talents are automatically His. I'm going to say that again. When our hearts are fully His, automatically, without question, our talents, our treasures, and our time, it's His.

I was preaching in Vienna, Austria, many years ago. I had a packed house, and at the end of my message, I gave an invitation. I invited people to come forward that wanted to give their lives to Christ. The front of that little church was filled with people. Among them was one of Vienna's leading opera singers. Opera's a big deal in Austria. In fact, one of the premier, most famous, most revered opera houses in the world is found in Vienna. The leading opera singer came forward and gave her life to Christ that night.

There was another lady. I still remember seeing her all these years ago with her two kids standing next to her in the crowd. She just stood out to me. Turns out there's a trolley that runs on these tracks down the street if you've ever been to Vienna. It ran right outside of the church, and the trolley broke down outside of the church before service.

There's people coming into the building, and there was a prostitute on the trolley with her two kids. One of the kids said, "Mom, I need to use the bathroom." She saw these people going in. She came in to ask if her kids could use the bathroom, and of course, the people said, "Yes," and she decided to stay. She heard the gospel. She responded and came forward and gave her life to Jesus. I was back in the same church holding a meeting one year later, 12 months almost to the day later. Guess who's upfront leading worship? The opera singer. She's the worship leader.

I had a resource table that had books and all sorts of stuff on it. Guess who they'd appointed to run the resource table? It was the ex-prostitute that had given her life to Jesus. They had gotten saved, became members of the church, and they gave Jesus what they had. They went all in, and God wants you to be all in. Secondly, the transformation took place, now listen to me, because there was a special measure of God's grace bestowed upon them. There was a special measure of God's grace bestowed upon them. Listen, 2 Corinthians 8:1-4 NKJV,

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¹ Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: ² that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. ³ For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, ⁴ imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.

Now, Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, saying, “Look, we want you to understand about the grace of God that was bestowed on the churches of Macedonia. This is a grace that came in addition to the grace that comes to all of us at salvation.” It was something that the Corinthian church had not yet experienced. Among other things, the grace of God allows us to obtain the unattainable. It allows us to do what we cannot do in our own strength and with our own wisdom. In fact, did you notice in verse 3, he said, “Look, you need to understand the grace of God that He put on this church in Macedonia.”

He said, “They went to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability.” How can you do that? Grace. You can go to the limit of your ability. There’s nothing else you can do. There’s not another step you can take. You have no more strength. You have no more life. You have no more wisdom, and the grace of God will take you beyond your ability.

They went to the limits of ability, and grace took them beyond the limits of their ability. Now, it wasn’t merely some act of God’s sovereignty that this was bestowed upon them. This astounding measure of God’s grace was entered into, on their part, by choice. Paul is now encouraging the Corinthians to make the same choice. Listen, verses 6-7 NKJV. He says,

⁶ So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. ⁷ But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also.

There’s this influence of God’s Spirit that allows you to obtain what you can’t obtain on your own. It allows you to go beyond your ability. He said, “We want you to enter into this same grace. We want you to make the same decision that they made.” Consider this in verse 7. He said, “Look, you abound in all of these things. You abound in faith; that’s good. You abound in speech. You abound in knowledge. You abound in diligence. You abound in your love.” In 2 Corinthians 1:7, he said, “You come behind in no gift.” And yet, they had not experienced; they did not have the grace of God working in their lives the way the Macedonian Christians did. There was a difference between them.

Now, something happens when we make that choice to respond to God and go all in. And say, “God, my treasure, my time, and my talent, they’re Yours.” Some of you may remember after Hurricane Katrina, we worked together with Service International. It’s a ministry out of St. Louis Family Church. Our good friends, Jeff and Patsy Perry, pastor that church. We worked for two years. We sent teams from Cottonwood. We sent 40, that’s not 14, that’s 38, 39, 40 teams. Over two years, literally, I think several thousand people went from Cottonwood in those teams. For two years, we rebuilt 700 homes, and we rebuilt seven churches during that two-year period.

There was a lady, a lady came and talked to me. She had gotten involved in a big way. She had sowed substantial funds into this outreach to help these people that had lost their homes, and to help these churches that had been destroyed. Then she got involved. I think she went on two trips herself and just worked. One day, in fact, I was standing right back there; she called me,

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says, "Pastor, something has happened to me." I said, "Tell me. What?" She said, "I'll never be the same." She said, "When I decided to go all in with this, and I got involved," she said, "it's changed me." I'll never forget her words. She said, "It's like I lived my whole life in black and white, and suddenly everything got switched to color."

What happened to her? She was ambushed by abundant grace. She was ambushed by the same abundant joy that God bestowed on those Macedonian believers. What did it mean for them? What did this radical generosity bring to them? First of all, it brought fruit. Everyone say, "fruit". It brought fruit and a bounty to their account. Listen to Paul's words, Philippians 4:15-17 NKJV. He said,

¹⁵ Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. ¹⁶ For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities.

¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account.

"The fruit that abounds to your account." Now does that talk about material resources? I suppose that's included within the thought. But more than anything, Paul is referring to the souls that he won and the lives that were changed as he preached the gospel in all of these different cities. It was fruit that abounded in their account. Jesus, when that crowd was coming out of the city of Samaria to Him at the Well of Sychar, He says to the disciples, "Lift up your eyes. Look at the fields. They're white and ready for harvest." And referred to them as a harvest of fruit.

In the book of James, when it talks about souls coming to faith in Christ, it refers to them as the precious fruit of the earth. Here, Paul is telling them, because you've supported me, all the souls that have been won, all of the marriages that have been restored, all of the people that have had their shattered lives put back together, that's fruit that abounds to your account.

I think of the pensioner. He fasts one meal a week, and he puts that money into world missions. Doesn't have much to start with but figures he can fast one day a week, so he does that. You know what? When that pensioner gets to heaven, there's going to be hundreds of people that will come up to him or her and say, "I'm here because of your generosity. I'm fruit, and in the ledgers of heaven, you're the one that won me to Christ. It went to your account." When I get to heaven, I'm going to find the people that gave to a little mission in Medford, Oregon. I got saved in that street mission. They gave long enough to keep that little mission open for me to come to Christ in it.

That night when I came, I had terrible problems with substance abuse. I was an alcoholic. I'd been on a four-year drunk. I hadn't been sober in four years. I gave my life to Jesus in that little mission, and people laid hands on me, and God set me free. From that day to this day, it's been almost 50 years, I have not had another illegal drug in my body.

Some people might be surprised, I'm going to find them in heaven and say, "You may not have met me, but I'm your fruit." They're going to be way surprised beyond that because all sorts of other people are going to come up to them. I'm thinking about a big Maori boy that I met, a huge mountain of a man. I'm doing meetings in New Zealand. He comes up to me immaculately dressed in a suit and tie, and he's huge. He puts me in a bear hug, lifts me up off the ground, and then he starts crying. Big Maori.

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He said, "Pastor, I was in prison, and I saw a broadcast from Cottonwood Church, and I found Jesus." He said, "Now I'm a full-time evangelist, and I spend my time going up and down across my country winning souls to Christ." He said, "Thank you." Well, you know what? He's going to find those people that gave and kept the Medford mission open. It's interesting after he hugged me, he took his ring off his finger and gave it to me. I still have it. It's a little greenstone ring. Just to give you an idea of how big this boy was. Yes, I think he wore it on his pinky. I got room left over my thumb. He was a big boy.

It's not the size of the gift; it's the size of the heart behind the gift. The little widow that threw in her two mites, we'd say two pennies. It was the smallest Roman coin that was minted, pretty much close to worthless as far as the power to buy something with it. But it was all she had. Jesus said, "She's putting more than everyone else."

I've got this in my hand. Floor director, here, that is a widow's mite. Little tiny coin, she threw two of these in the offering. Jesus said, "It was more than everyone else," and a lot of people threw much into the treasury, but they gave out of their abundance. But she gave all she had. Friend, that registers in heaven, and God multiplies it. God multiplies it, and it becomes fruit that abounds to our account. Now, there's more. It brought fruit to them.

Secondly, it brought them a promise. Everyone say, "a promise". It brought fruit, and it brought a promise. You'll know the promise. I'm quite sure. Let me read it though. Philippians 4:18-19 NKJV. He says,

¹⁸ Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

We all know that promise. "My God will supply all your need according to His riches and glory by Christ." But we can't divorce the promise from the context. I like what Pastor Harrison says, "The text without a context is just a con." There's something to that. The context was people that were giving sacrificially to see others find Jesus like they'd found Jesus, to see others helped like they'd been helped. They'd come from, please help us, to let us help, and they'd given sacrificially. God was pleased. It was an aroma that ascended into heaven.

The apostle Paul, by the Spirit of God attached to the promise, he said, "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches and glory by Christ Jesus." When you go all in for Jesus and get saved, giving your money is not an issue. If it's an issue with your money, it's actually an issue with your heart. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart is also." They're inseparably connected.

When I got saved, I was so thankful. I'd never been anywhere where they'd taken up an offering. I thought, "What a grand idea." Anytime I had money, I put it in. Even if it was money I had for food, I didn't care. I'm a young single guy. I'm living in my car. Big deal if I have to skip a meal; I'd put it in. When I ran out of money, I started giving my stuff.

Some of you may recall me talking about this. I remember I'm in a service, and the evangelist is preaching. They take up an offering, I didn't have any money, but I had a really big hunting knife. It's about that long. I put it in the offering bucket. You should have seen everybody's eyes when that went down the aisle. That's a normal response to a heart that's received the grace of God. To that person that enters into that generosity and that grace that God talked

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about, he said, “My God will supply all your needs,” not according to your need, but according to God’s riches.

Now, if He just meets the need according to the need, once the need’s met, the supply is over, but the way that the Bible puts it, it speaks of surplus. He supplies your need according to His riches. In other words, enough to meet the need with sufficient left over to give into every other good work and to help somebody else. That’s God’s way. When the fish and loaves were multiplied, there were baskets left over. Overflow, abundance, that is just God’s nature. It is God’s way.

I remember reading the story of Alexander the Great. He’s riding along with his entourage, and there’s a beggar on the road asking for alms, and he asked Alexander for alms. Alexander takes out his purse and tosses him several gold coins. One of his aides is astonished and said, “Sir, copper coins would suit a beggar’s needs.” It’s reported that Alexander responded this way. He said, “Copper coins may suit a beggar’s needs, but gold coins suit Alexander’s giving.”

How much more our Creator, our Father in heaven, will He supply our needs according to His riches in glory? What did that generosity that they got involved in, what did it mean for the Kingdom? We’ve already mentioned souls were coming in, but there’s more than that. 2 Corinthians 9:11-13 TLB. He said,

¹¹ Yes, God will give you much so that you can give away much, and when we take your gifts to those who need them they will break out into thanksgiving and praise to God for your help. ¹² So two good things happen as a result of your gifts—those in need are helped, and they overflow with thanks to God. ¹³ Those you help will be glad not only because of your generous gifts to themselves and to others, but they will praise God for this proof that your deeds are as good as your doctrine.

He said two other things happen. Number one, people are helped. Number two, God is thanked and praised. I will never forget when I was in Bible college, the apartment next to me, there was Robert and Vicky, a married couple. I think they were probably 22, 23 years old, a little bit younger than me. I heard that they had a need. I don’t even remember who told me or how I found out, but I had 50 bucks, and I went over and gave it to Robert and \$50 then is certainly a lot more than it is now. It certainly wasn’t the moon. I’ll never forget, Robert took the money I gave him and then he started to cry.

He took a few steps away from me and turned toward the windows that faced outside of his apartment, and he lifted his hands and began to worship God. I had the distinct feeling that I should take my shoes off. I felt like Moses at the burning bush. There was something so sacred and so holy transpiring that it literally made me afraid. God’s presence was there, and I’ll never forget it. You don’t know the praise that ascends to heaven sometimes when you become the answer to someone’s prayer, and you meet their need. It is a sacred, holy thing that occurs. There’s actually a third thing that happens. He tells us in the next verse, verse 14 TLB says,

¹⁴ And they will pray for you with deep fervor and feeling because of the wonderful grace of God shown through you.

The next thing that happens, they’ll pray for you. Some of you go back with us much longer than this. Some have started coming to Cottonwood after it. You may know about it, you may not, but in January 2014, I was in a serious boating accident. They didn’t expect me to live. Once they

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figured out I'd live, they didn't know if I'd ever be able to speak again because the trauma and the damage to my throat was so severe.

There were a lot of things going on. Bleeding on the brain. I tore my throat open. It had been crushed. I had a dead vocal cord. My tongue was in about eight pieces. "He's going to live. We don't know if he's ever going to be able to eat or drink again." In fact, everything I ate and drank was through a tube in my stomach for quite a while. I didn't have a sip of water for three months.

If you get thirsty, just a syringe full of water directly into your stomach, you can get pretty dry, believe me. I had no ability to swallow. I had a vocal cord that didn't work, and I'd lost the ability to swallow. I couldn't really talk. I had to learn how to speak all over again. It's interesting, if you go back and listen to me preaching prior to January 2014, you listen now sounds like a completely different person. My voice is completely different because all the acoustics inside are different.

But you know what? I can eat, I can drink, I can talk, and I did live. I realize that I'm here because people here listening to me and actually, around the world, prayed for me. Prayer was poured out, and I stand here as a miraculous answer to those prayers. I'm well aware of that. Even all these years later, wherever I go, it doesn't matter if I'm in Europe, if I'm in Africa, if I'm in Asia, if I'm in Australasia, if I'm in Latin America, doesn't matter, wherever I go, people that I have never met come up to me and they say, "When we heard about your boating accident, we prayed for you, and we prayed for Cottonwood Church."

People that I've never met to this day, in fact, it happened just the other day in the store. Somebody I'd never met before said, "You're Bayless Conley?" I said, "Yes." He says, "Man, we prayed for you, and we prayed for your Church."

Now, they prayed out of compassion, certainly, but they also prayed out of connection because we had sowed something and been sowing and continue to sow into people's lives. Right now, this service that we're doing right here today, this is going to go out into more than 130 countries in 11 different languages. You want to see something funny? You ought to watch me speak Nepali or Arabic or Farsi or German or French or Russian. It goes out around the world, and people have been touched, and they've been blessed by what Cottonwood is giving. They prayed out of compassion, I understand that, but it was also because of connection.

Paul says, "Hey, look, when you give, people are helped, God is glorified and then they will pray for you." I think that is a pretty cool thing. For those that move from help me, and again, I just want to emphasize, if you are in that help me category, do not feel bad. God has help for you. He sees you, He loves you, and He wants to help you as much as He helped me that night when my water pump went out on my truck on MacArthur Boulevard. He sees you. He hears your cries for help. His plan is to move you from, help me, to, God, please, let me help someone else.

What happens when you move from help me to let me help someone else? A special grace is deposited upon your life. Fruit abounds to your account. You are given a promise of supernatural supply according to His riches. God is glorified, and praised, and people that are impacted will pray for you. The question is, do you want to go all in? I love Paul. All those things we read up to verse 14 there, verse 15, he brings it right back to the central focus as it should be. Verse 15 TLB, he said,

¹⁵ Thank God for his Son—his Gift too wonderful for words.

The Grace That Comes from Giving

It all comes back to Jesus and the generosity of God and the grace of God in sending His Son to die for our sins. I got saved in that little street mission all those years ago. I like to contrast myself with my wife. She's not here this morning. It was actually our daughter's birthday and our daughter-in-law's birthday. They are spending a couple of girl days together right now. It's nice. It's been quiet around the house.

My wife, from a natural standpoint, is the exact opposite of me. I was a wild boy. She was the teacher's pet. The girl has never smoked a cigarette in her life. She just was always the most studious one in school and just endeavored to do stuff right. She obviously didn't, but she came to the point in her life, she realized she was just as lost as somebody like me. The Bible says, "The whole world stands guilty before God." We don't get into heaven because of our good works. We don't get into heaven because of our personal efforts. It's a matter of grace. Jesus Christ died. He took upon Himself the sin of the world and died under the weight of our sins.

If a person is willing to repent, and that means to let go of and turn away from your old lifestyle and put your trust in Christ, then you can be saved. Repentance is a big word. Now, let me just take a moment. I won't be long, but let me just talk about it. I have an acquaintance. He had a complete heart transplant. They told him that without it, his heart was so diseased and so defective that he wouldn't be able to live past 45. He got the heart transplant and quite literally got a new lease on life.

Did you know God promises to give people a heart transplant? You can read it a number of times in the book of Ezekiel. God says, "I'm going to take the stony heart out of you. I'm going to give you a heart of flesh. I'm going to take the hard heart out of you, and I'm going to give you a heart that is sensitive to me, and that wants to obey me. I'm going to give you a new heart and a new spirit."

He's looking forward to Calvary, to the new birth. Literally, our heart, our spirit is transformed, is changed. I've gotten a new heart. I've gotten a new spirit when I gave my life to Jesus. Just think about my acquaintance. If he was unwilling to let go of his old heart, he's not going to get a new one. Or if he couldn't be convinced that his old heart was diseased and faulty, he wouldn't want to part with it.

That's a big part of salvation. Jesus said, "Repent and believe the gospel." Repentance means I can't hang on to my old heart. I can't hang on to my old life. I can't hang on to my sinful ways and have Jesus too. It doesn't work. Repentance, being willing to let go of the old life, always must precede saving faith. Always. Listen, you can't fix that old heart of yours. You can't fix it. You have to get a heart transplant, and only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus.

Maybe you're like me. You've lived a bit of a wild and woolly lifestyle. I talked to a young lady after service. You never would have believed it from talking to her, but she had been addicted to crystal meth and spent a lot of time in and out of jail, and had a rough life. You never ever would have suspected it. She and her husband have turned their lives around, and they're living for Christ now. She just told me her story through tears after the first service. You may be a bit of a wild girl, a bit of a wild boy; we make great Christians.

Oh, yes, we do. I was excessive in almost everything I did. Didn't matter if it was a sport, if we were playing. We play a game of basketball, I would be hoarse and couldn't talk after we played because I'd be yelling so loud at everybody. This is just me. God takes who you are, and He changes it, and He'll use it for His glory. To the wild boys and wild girls out on the plaza, in here,

The Grace That Comes from Giving

listen, you know, nobody needs to tell you need to be fixed. Jesus has a new heart for you, but you got to be willing to let go of the old stuff and come to Him.

You may be on the other side of the coin, like my wife. You don't mind paying taxes. You like cats. You try and be honest, and you're honest in your business, but you know what? You're just as lost. You're just as lost. The whole world stands guilty before God. Everyone's under this category of sin. Everyone needs a savior.

I just want to give you an opportunity. If you want to repent and give your life to Jesus, we're going to pray in just a minute. In fact, in a minute, I'm going to have you close your eyes wherever you might be. If you are in Jakarta, Indonesia, right now, and you're watching me, and you know in your heart of hearts it's time to change, I want you to pray with us when we pray. If you're in Friedrichshafen, Germany, right now, there by the Bodensee, you need to give your life to Jesus. Yes, He's talking to you in Switzerland, in Peru, wherever you happen to be.

Es tiempo de cambiar tu vida mi señor, mi amigo, amiga. Necesitas aceptar a Cristo Jesús como tu Salvador y tu Señor. Abra su corazón a la Palabra de Dios; Él va a cambiar su vida en este momento. Él tiene salvación para ti, Él es el camino, la vida, Él es tu respuesta.

Listen. Wherever you might be in life, if you're willing to pray, I'm just going to, in a minute, have you close your eyes. I'm going to count to three. If you want to say, "Yes," pray this prayer with me. You just lift a hand when I count to three. It's just an outward way to express your heart. Your heart is reaching up to God, and your hand is expressing that. It's a reflection. I'll acknowledge any hands in here. Outside in the plaza, I want you to put them up as well and then put them down, and we'll all pray a prayer together.

I can lead you in the prayer. You can tie a sincere heart around it, and God will hear you. Alright, just close your eyes. One. I don't think it's a coincidence that we're together. Two. Are you ready? Let's get that hand up. Three. I want to pray. Jesus is your answer, my friend. A lot of hands, looks like every section. A lot of hands. It's all good. All in the upper sections, hands as well. All right. Go ahead and put them down. Would you put a hand on your heart? Let's pray out loud and say,

Oh God, I come to You. With all of my heart and my soul, I know that I need You. I cannot fix myself. I cannot fix my own life, but You can. I believe Your Son, Jesus Christ, died on the cross in my place. I believe He was raised from the dead. Today, God, I make a choice. I give my heart to Jesus. Lord Jesus, come into my life. I submit to Your Lordship. Wherever You lead me, I'll go. Jesus, I'm telling You, I'm all in. Amen. Amen.

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