

The Three Graces
2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

Each one of us who follows the Lord has his or her own story about giving money to the Lord and to the Lord's work. We each have a story about how this has been taught to us, how were we told that giving was a part of obeying God, and how did we respond. Our story will be about trusting God, and about what kind of examples we had, and about inner choices. Maybe we give but we feel like we're never giving enough, or maybe we give and we do it with joy.

This is one kind of story we don't tell to each other. We will tell some private stories to each other once in a while, hard stories, but we don't talk to each other about giving. If we don't think we're giving enough, then we feel too guilty to speak of it, so we avoid the whole topic.

And if God has made us generous givers and we do it with joy, then talking about it is boasting, and we're not supposed to do that. So, we just don't talk about it. Probably that's too bad.

2 Corinthians is a story about giving. Paul was collecting money from Gentile churches to take to poor Jewish believers in and around Jerusalem. He wanted the Corinthians to be a part of this, and when they first heard about it they were eager and they promised that for sure they'd give money to this. But time passed since then, and they still had not collected anything.

This story is mostly about the Corinthian church, but in the background are the Macedonian churches, a few churches a few hundred kilometers north of Corinth. The Macedonian churches lived in severe troubles, and with deep poverty, but God gave those churches a wealth of generosity, and they had already produced a surprising amount of money for this collection.

Each one of us is either a Macedonian giver, or a Corinthian giver, or perhaps somewhere in between. Think about your own story as we go through this. I'll read our whole text: 8:16-9:5.

8:16 - Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. ¹⁷ For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. ¹⁸ And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. ¹⁹ What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry this grace, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰ We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this abundance. ²¹ For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man.

²² In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. ²³ As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and the glory of Christ. ²⁴ Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

9 There is no need for me to write to you about this ministry to the Lord's people. ² For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. ³ But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴ For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the blessing you had promised. Then it will be ready as a blessing, not as grudgingly given.

Two groups of people will come to Corinth, two delegations, to deal with this collection. Although the Corinthians had promised to give, no money has been collected there at all. So the first delegation is to prepare the Corinthians. Titus and the two brothers will come to actually pass around the hat and collect the money. We assume Titus is also carrying this letter.

The second group will be Paul and some Macedonians, and they will pick up the money and take it to Jerusalem for the poor among the Lord's people there. What Paul does *not* want to happen is that he and the Macedonians would come, the second group, but no gift would be ready.

Very embarrassing for Paul, who's been saying that the Corinthians were eager for this already a year ago. And very embarrassing for the Corinthians, too, if the Macedonians come and there's no gift ready, but Paul says he's not going to talk about the Corinthian's shame. He's a sly one, by saying he won't speak of it he already has.

But Paul is working hard to be as kind and encouraging to the stingy unreliable Corinthians as he can be. In a sense, they deserve to be called stingy and unreliable, they've earned it. But in these two chapters Paul never talks to them like that at all. He is direct, but always encouraging and always tactful. Which is how the Lord talks to you and me about these things.

So the first delegation, Titus and the brothers, is to gather the gift from the Corinthians, so that everything goes smoothly when the second delegation gets there.

Why do the two brothers come along with Titus? To make sure no one can criticize the way the money is handled. For his part, Paul has complete confidence in Titus. Is Paul worried that while collecting this gift in Corinth, Titus will take a bit for himself? No, Paul has no concern about that whatsoever.

But Paul has enemies in that church, people watching for ways to make Paul and his helpers look bad. So two other trusted church people are coming with Titus, and the three will deal with this together, so no one can say "Paul's just sending Titus so the two of them can keep our gift."

We are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man. We do not say to the Lord's people, "why don't you trust us?"

Rather, we take *pains* at this, we *work* at this, to handle the gifts of God's people in a way that is *obviously* clean, so that even the doubters cannot complain. So Titus comes with two brothers who have excellent reputations in the churches, chosen by the churches as trustworthy.

Why are the other two not named? No one knows. But not naming them does accomplish this: it puts Titus in charge. Without saying so it makes Tts the leader of the three, which will probably be a relief to the Corinthians, since he's the only one of the three that they know.

Churches There is something going on here that we don't about very much, but I think this is the time. This Scripture describes quite a few churches working together. There are several Macedonian churches. They are partnering with the Corinthian church in this.

The Corinthian believers and Macedonian believers have not seen each other, though heard of each other. And these churches are working together to help other churches in Judea, and none of these believers have ever seen each other.

This notion floats around that pure churches do not connect with other churches. The churches that really want to follow the Lord are independent churches. That is NOT true, that is sadly misguided. The apostle Paul and the NT churches have no interest in that kind of isolation.

We think denominations are bad, because they take extra administration and work. This collection took a lot of extra administration and work, from no one more than the apostle Paul himself. Churches can do things together than they cannot do alone. An isolated and independent church gets no support in the New Testament.

Furthermore, do you know how bad the Corinthian church was? 2 Cor 12 lists what was going on there: "jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, disorder, impurity, sexual immorality, and debauchery." These have all been problems in that church for some time. They've been urged to repent but have not changed their ways.

Would we partner with a church like that, to send money to needy churches elsewhere? We might have a long discussion about that. Should the well-behaved Macedonian churches join with the worldly Corinthian church in this service to the Lord? Of course they should!

For the apostle Paul, separating from the Corinthian church in this collection, because the Corinthian church was so worldly, was a terrible idea. More to the point, separating never crossed his mind. Were they a worldly church? Yes. Was it a problem? Yes, a big problem. So, should other churches stop partnering with them in the Lord's work? Certainly NOT!

They were still the Lord's people, of course they would join hands with each other to get bring this blessing to the Lord's people in Judea. We separate from dismal churches and pat ourselves on the back for holding to the Lord's ways. The Lord's way is this: *make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*. Now, back to the collection.

The Three Graces of God God wants his people to share what they have with those in need. To make this happen, God does three things, he give three different graces.

First, God brings people into our lives that are eager to help us with this, God puts concern in them to guide us: 8:16-17 - *Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you.* ¹⁷ *For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative.*

God put it into the heart of Titus a concern to help the Corinthians with this collection. God did that. First God put that eagerness and concern into Paul, then God put the same eagerness and concern into Titus. And Marilyn and I have been influenced by people who not only gave generously, but were eager to help others serve the Lord in the same way.

So first, God brings people into our lives, like Paul and Titus, who have real concern to urge others in this way.

Second, God makes US rich in generosity. 8:1-2 - *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.* ² *In the midst of a very severe trial, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity.*

The Macedonian churches ended up with “a wealth of generosity.” How did they end up there? “*We want you do know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*” God puts his love into action to stir US so that WE become rich in generosity.

The first grace is people like Paul and Titus. God puts concern in them to help us serve the Lord this way. The second grace is God moving in us so that we become generous.

Third, God gives us something to give. This will come up mostly in next week’s text, the last ten verses of 2 Cor 9. When we give, God will provide enough that we can keep giving. That is the promise Paul spells out for the Corinthians. Our giving is like planting seed. God will make sure we always have seed to plant. That also is his grace.

Every time any believer puts money into the offering, God has worked in these three ways. God gave someone the concern to guide us and encourage us in this. Then God gave us grace so that we were ready to be generous. Third, God provided so we had enough to give.

The last line of this section, 9:15, says “*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.*” No believers give without God doing a lot of giving first. He gets the thanks for all of this.

How much should we give? Based on these two chapters, the answer would be: You consider you income and consider your needs, and then what amount of giving would you call “generous”? Give that. In these chapters, giving is based on our situation (8:12), and what we decide in our heart (9:7). How much can you give freely and openly?

We have a voice inside us that says, “keep it all, you need it all, giving anything is a mistake.” We also have a voice that says, “you will never give enough, you should give almost everything away.” The voice of greed is never satisfied, and the voice of guilt is never satisfied either.

Do your best to ignore them both. Based on your income and needs, and the amount of grace and faith God has given you, what would honour the Lord? Don’t overthink this.

Those are the three graces of God that make giving happen. Now I want to show you the five labels. This Scripture puts five labels on our gift. In plainer language, Paul calls the gift five different things here. So you imagine yourself going to the offering box back there and putting into the offering a part of your income. This is what you’re putting in there.

1, Grace. 8:19 - *He was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry this grace, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help.*

It’s an usual use of the word “grace,” and almost none of your translations will read that way, but that’s what it actually says, and it is unusual in Greek also. When we put money into the offering, cash or cheque, we are putting in *grace*. God has shown grace to us, and we are sharing grace around with the Lord’s people.

2, Bounty, abundance. 8:20 *We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this abundance.* Your Bible will say “generous gift” or something like that. Paul does not know how much the Corinthians will give. Maybe lots, maybe not so much. Whatever it is, though, it comes out of obedience to the Lord, and it is generosity in action. So it is abundance. What goes into our offering box every Sunday morning is called “abundance,” it’s called “generous gift.”

3, Proof of your love. 8:24 - *Show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.* What we offer to the Lord proves that we love him and we love his people. What Henry takes to the other room and counts every Sunday, that is proof that we love the Lord and we love his people. That’s what goes into our offering box.

4, Ministry. 9:1 - *There is no need for me to write to you about this ministry to the Lord’s people.* That’s a curious sentence, but we’ll ignore that. *This ministry to the Lord’s people.* “Ministry” or “service” is a common word in 2 Corinthians. Paul has the ministry of righteousness, and ministry of reconciliation, and so on.

Our giving is also ministry. It is called “ministry” four times in these two giving chapters (8:4, 9:1,12,13). In 8:4 and here it is “ministry to the Lord’s people.” Our gifts are ministry to the Lord’s people.

5, Blessing. 9:5 - *So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the blessing you had promised. Then it will be ready as a blessing, not as grudgingly given.*

Your Bibles almost certainly do not translate this as “blessing.” It is a peculiar thing to call a financial gift a “blessing,” but it is peculiar in the NT as well. It is used twice this way in this verse, and not like that anywhere else in the NT, not elsewhere either to my knowledge.

God is making a point here, and we should let it stand. Our gifts are a blessing. When someone blesses me, they put God’s care and kindness on me. When we put money in the offering, we are giving God’s care and kindness to another of the Lord’s people.

These are the five labels, what we are actually putting in our offering box: 1, God’s grace, and 2, God’s abundance. 3, we are putting proof of our love in there, our love for Christ and for his people. 4, we are ministering to the Lord’s people, serving them, and 5, we are blessing them, we are passing on God’s care and kindness to our brothers and sisters.

There is sometimes a temptation to make the offering no more than an awkward necessity, something that the practicalities oblige us to continue. It is nothing of the sort. These five labels make it as holy and honourable before God as anything that happens when we are together. It is a gracious work of God that takes place in our midst every week. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.