

The Grace of Giving: Who is the Generous One?

2 Corinthians 8:1–15

Turn to 2 Corinthians 8 please. In this Scripture, God invites us to give generously. We're talking about money. Give money generously as a way of serving the Lord and his people.

Before I was a pastor, I read some good advice in a book. The writer gave advice to pastors. He said, "Don't preach on giving when the church needs money. Preach a message or two on giving every year, whether giving is up or down. That way the people connect giving to being faithful to God rather than some particular appeal. Make the message about following God, not meeting some need." That was new to me and made sense to me. I remembered it, and we have done it that way.

Now some background to 2 Corinthians 8–9. The NT tells us of two different collections for poor believers in Jerusalem. The first one happens at the end of Acts 11, where believers in Antioch gathered money and sent it to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Paul.

Later on, Paul organized another collection from several Gentile churches, again for the poor believers in Jerusalem and that area. We read about this one in Romans 15 and 1 Corinthians 16, and also in 2 Corinthians 8–9. These two chapters are by far most careful description of Christian giving that we get in the New Testament, and we will spend three Sundays going through them.

These two chapters of 2 Corinthians do two things, they persuade and they teach. The Corinthians need to be persuaded. That part of us that says, "no, you will not have my money, I will keep my money," that was alive and well in Corinth.

The Corinthians had known about this collection for at least a year, and they said at the start that yes, they were eager to collect money for this. But in a year they've done nothing. So Paul works to persuade them, and in that way God works also to persuade us.

Besides persuading them, this Scripture *teaches* us about how giving works in God's kingdom, and how it looks. This happens with the words he uses. For example, these two chapters urge us to give money, but Paul never once mentions "money." He's obviously talking about money, but he never uses that word. There are several different words, and that is one part of *teaching* us what giving looks like in God's kingdom.

These chapters also teach us about generosity. When God's people give generously, who gets the credit for being generous. Obviously, the generous believers. No. In these chapters, that is the wrong answer. When people give generously, someone else gets the credit. You'll see in 8:1–2.

8:1–5 The First Example: The Grace of God in Macedonia

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 end up with a peculiar kind of wealth. A wealth of generosity. How does one measure generosity? Does generosity come in 5s and 10s and 20s and 50s like money? I don't think so. But whatever it comes in, the Macedonian churches were rich in it. We're talking about Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Those churches had big piles of generosity.

What does that mean? What did they actually have? It means they were ready and willing to give, the kind of readiness that produced quite a bit of money. They were rich in that willingness and readiness to give. They had a wealth of generosity.

From where did it come? Three things in v2: severe trial, abundant joy, and extreme poverty. V2: *In the midst of (1) a very severe trial, their (2) abundant joy and their (3) extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity.*

But this still does not make any sense. How does (1) severe trial plus (2) abundant joy plus (3) extreme poverty produce a wealth of generosity? To answer that, we go back to the beginning, v1, to the grace of God: *And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.* God's grace here is his loving help to make us like his Son Jesus.

We sometimes understand God's grace as how he forgives our sins, and accepts us though we are sinful. That's true, the Bible teaches that. But God also puts his love into action to change us, his loving help to make us like his Son. And it works. We are different people than we would be if we had not come to Christ. We've changed. God's grace changes us.

God gave a particular kind of grace to the Macedonian churches, a particular loving help, a particular work of the Holy Spirit. What evidence was there of this? That wealth of generosity. When God gives his grace, his loving help, THEN: *in the midst of severe trial, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity.*

Paul wants the Corinthian church to imitate the Macedonian churches. God wants us to imitate the Macedonian churches. But the hero in this story is not the Macedonian churches. The hero is God, who gives this kind of grace. Thanks be to God for his grace.

Turn to the end of 2 Corinthians 9. Paul is telling the Corinthians what will happen after they contribute to this collection.

Here's what will happen. It describes the reaction of the Lord's people who received the money: 9:14–15 *[those people who will have received the collection from you] in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace that God has given you. Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift.*

If the Corinthians take part in this collection, the real gift will not be the money the Corinthians sent to Jerusalem. The real gift will be the grace/generosity that God gave the Corinthians.

And don't miss: God's grace did not take the Macedonians out of their severe trial, nor did God's grace take them out of their extreme poverty. God's powerful grace left them in their severe trial and left them in their extreme poverty, and gave them a treasure: a wealth of generosity.

This line about God's grace makes me laugh, because this is so NOT what I want from God. This is what I want: "God, take away my trials, take away my poverty, and give me money." Here's what God did: God allowed their trials and their poverty, but he gave them joy and generosity. If God wanted to give you a wealth of generosity, and leave the rest of your life alone, would you accept that treasure?

The Holy Spirit wants us to have a wealth of generosity. That was the grace that God gave the Macedonian churches.

Let's keep reading about the grace of God on the Macedonian churches: 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 ministry to the Lord's people.⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.*

People are asking and receiving a lot here that's not money. Who gives to who, what do they give? First, v1, God gave grace to the Macedonian churches. So, v2, the Macedonians have a wealth of generosity. From this (v3), the Macedonian churches gave generously to the collection.

In v4, the Macedonians want something from Paul. They are GIVING money, but what is it they WANT? *They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the Lord's people.* In the material world, they are giving money. In the kingdom, they are receiving a privilege worth pleading for: to have a part in a ministry to the Lord's people.

So Paul gave them what they longed for: the privilege of sharing in a ministry to the Lord's people. In November we at KCC gave our offerings to different organizations of the Lord's people. Our church money does just this. We do understand this as a ministry to the Lord's people. We enjoy that. In the kingdom of God, it is a privilege worth pursuing.

They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. The Macedonians did not just give money. They started by giving themselves to the Lord.

They must have said something like this to Paul: “We are the Lord’s servants, Paul, we belong to him, so of course we want to be a part of this collection. And you are the Lord’s apostle, so tell us what to do, we’ll do this however you say.” (Which the Corinthians were NOT doing.)

The real giving here: 1, God gives grace to the Macedonians; 2, Paul gives privilege to the Macedonians (the privilege of sharing in this ministry); 3, the Macedonians give money to the collection; 4, the Macedonians also give themselves to the Lord; and 5, they give themselves to Paul for purpose of the collection. That’s how this all looks in the kingdom of God.

8:6–7 The First Urging: Complete this Grace, Excel in the Grace of Giving

So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in eagerness, and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

Bring to completion this act of grace on your part. God gives his grace to us, his loving help to us, and when we contribute to the Lord’s people we are passing on the same, we are giving the same kind of loving help we’ve ourselves received from God. That’s what money in the collection is actually doing. That’s why this is a ministry to the Lord’s people.

The Corinthians had been eager when they first heard about this collection, but time has passed and they’ve done nothing. That’s why Paul urges them to complete it. *V7 But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in eagerness, and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

Faith, speech, knowledge – these are spiritual gifts, and the Corinthians had many such gifts. So Paul encourages them: you excel in other graces the Spirit gives, see that you excel in this grace also. The idea that they would be exempt from giving does not occur in this Scripture.

Complete this act of grace. Excel in the grace of giving. God’s grace is not automatic. It also needs our choice and our efforts.

8:8 The Love Test: A Comparison with Others

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

Imagine the Lord saying this directly to us here: *I am not commanding you at KCC to give, but I am testing the sincerity of your love, for me and for the Lord’s people, by comparing your love with the earnestness of others.*

Would we feel pressured by this? We might. And we know that's bad, people are not supposed to be pressured about things like this. But actually the Lord Jesus is fine with this. This is the Lord talking to that church and to our church. It is a fair test. Christian love gives money to the Lord's work and the Lord's people. The test is fair. By God's grace, our church passes the test.

8:9 The Second Example: The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The first example was the Macedonian churches, and the grace God gave them. The second example is our Lord himself. Our Lord was rich, before his incarnation, before the Word became Flesh, in the beginning when he was with God. He was rich.

For the sake of us here in this congregation, every one of you and me, he became poor. He did this so that through his poverty, we would become rich. We have each one of us won the eternal lottery. The very best thing that could happen to any human has already happened to us: we have put our trust in Christ, and we are children of God. We are wealthy now, and everything that God has to give is ready and being kept for us.

Our Lord became poor so we could receive every blessing of God. This is the Lord's grace to us, his loving help. Because of his poverty, we have wealth that nothing on earth can touch.

8:10–12 Second Urging: Finish your Work, Complete your Willingness, As you are Able

And here is my judgment 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 one does not have.

Again, complete what you started. The desire itself is good. The Corinthians had the desire a year ago. Nothing has happened since then, but Paul does not insult the desire itself. The desire to give is good. But it is not complete.

According to your means, according to what you have. Paul does not tell them how much to give. He has used two examples, the Macedonian church and the Lord himself, and both of these gave much. The New Testament never gets specific about these things. In the Old Testament it was one tenth of your income, but the New Testament does not make much use of that.

The gift is acceptable according to what you have, is how Paul puts it. If God has given us much, don't insult God with a tiny gift. On the other hand, if you just barely have enough, and money is always tight, then a small gift is entirely acceptable to God.

Later in chapter 9, Paul will say, “give whatever you decided in your heart to give.” In the past each one had decided what they would give. That’s fine says Paul, just give what you decided. He’s not pressuring them to increase that, just give what you decided, that will please God.

8:13–15 The Biblical Principle: Sharing God’s Provision

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. The goal is equality, ¹⁵ as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”

There is a basic principle that is taught especially in Deuteronomy, but it holds throughout the Bible. God provides enough for everyone, but he did not give it to everyone. [repeat]

The way God gives it, some would have more than they need, and others not enough. God’s plan is that *people* spread it out, the people who have it distribute it. That people need to share what God provides is not a failure in humans, or the human system, nor a failure in God’s system. God wants it exactly like that.

Beware of arrogance when we who have look at those who have not. We want to say, “If those people worked hard and used their heads, like I do, they would not be in need.” But listen to Moses: “You may say to yourself, ‘my ability and my energy have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God,” says Moses, “because he gave you the ability to produce wealth.” The ability comes from the Lord. And the Lord does not give it to everyone.

Deuteronomy 15:11 *There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded.* There will always be needs around us. God has no intention of fixing that. God wants to give it to some, and wants to see those who receive to be openhanded. God provides for everyone, but he does not give it to everyone. So God urges us to be open-handed. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, give our church the same grace, the same loving help, as you gave the Macedonians. Stir up in our church the same wealth of generosity you gave them. Help us seek out this privilege and honour, of ministering to the Lord’s people. And we want our actual giving be acceptable and pleasing to you. Lord Jesus, thank you for the ways you’ve already done this. We give ourselves to you. Lord Jesus, in your mercy, hear our prayer, make us generous. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.