

# The Overflow of Grace

Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

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## *'Tis the Season*

Thanksgiving time is a time to remember all we're thankful for. But it also marks a time when many people start vying for our money. The marketplace is calling for your spending. And charitable organizations and ministries are asking for your donations. We just finished Hosea last week and have two weeks until Advent. So we thought we'd spend these two weeks seeing what the Bible says about gratitude and generosity.

In 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul is writing to the church at Corinth about a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church experienced extreme poverty for various reasons, including persecution, famine, and taxation. They had significant need.

Paul spoke with the Corinthians about this need, before he wrote this letter. And he received a favorable response from them, at least initially. They had a desire to give, and made a commitment to give. But they hadn't followed through on their commitment. We know the Corinthians had the money, but for some reason they were dragging their feet. Maybe it was for fear that they would go without.

Sound familiar? When it comes to giving, most Christians have the desire to give, or to give more. And we generally make commitments to give. We make commitments to ourselves. We make pledges to organizations. And if we're a member of a church, we covenant with the church to give. But when it comes to follow through, sometimes things fall apart. I know I've been in that place many times. How can we make progress in giving?

In our passage this morning, Paul's making an appeal for the Corinthians to follow through on their desire and commitment to give. He calls them to be generous. And he gives them instruction on *how* to be generous. But most of his instruction is on *why* they should be generous. He's trying to motivate them with the gospel, not with guilt. His basic point is that generosity is grounded in God's grace. In fact, he even describes generosity as a form of grace.

The word for grace shows up ten times in chapters 8-9. The passage begins with Paul reminding the Corinthians of the grace of God. And it ends by referring to the grace of God. So obviously it's critical to his argument for generosity. The Greek word for grace is *charis*. It's translated in different ways throughout the passage. Sometimes simply as grace. Sometimes as favor. And sometimes as thanks. Listen for this theme as we read.

### **2 Corinthians 8:1-15<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup>for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup>For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, <sup>4</sup>begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints-- <sup>5</sup>and this, not as we expected, but they gave*

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

*themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. <sup>6</sup>Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. <sup>7</sup>But as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you--see that you excel in this act of grace also.*

*<sup>8</sup>I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. <sup>9</sup>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 by his poverty might become rich. <sup>10</sup>And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. <sup>11</sup>So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. <sup>12</sup>For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. <sup>13</sup>For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness <sup>14</sup>your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. <sup>15</sup>As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

This passage is all about calling the Corinthians to generosity. But the way Paul makes his argument is interesting. He makes a greater to lesser argument. He gives an extraordinary example of generosity from an unlikely source, the Macedonians. They gave in the midst of severe poverty. Then he calls the Corinthians, who are actually quite well-to-do, to a pretty ordinary kind of generosity. If the Macedonians could do so much with so little, then surely the Corinthians could do what they were called to do.

So to divide our time this morning, we're going to start with a case of giving from poverty (vv. 1-5), then we'll look at a call to give from prosperity (vv. 6-15).

## **A CASE FROM POVERTY (1-5)**

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Let's start with a case from poverty. Paul begins his appeal to be generous with the example of the Macedonian churches. They were in the middle of a really hard time. They were experiencing severe affliction. They were probably being persecuted. And that led to poverty. But in the midst of their affliction, they had joy.

Joy is a unique quality. It's not quite the same as happiness. Happiness generally depends on good circumstances. But joy transcends circumstances. Joy involves seeing the big picture. The Macedonians knew that their acceptance in Christ and the hope of glory was bigger than their rejection by the world and their present suffering. So they had joy. And that joy led them to generosity.

In addition to the concept of grace, the idea of overflow permeates this passage. In verse 2, we read that their abundance of joy, or literally their overflow of joy, in the midst of their affliction, overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

This is what we learn from their example. Joy in poverty can lead to extraordinary generosity. Why do I say their joy led to extraordinary giving? We see five evidences.

First, they gave beyond their ability. They didn't have squat. But they still gave. As we'll see in the latter part of the passage, we're all called to give according to our means. But they gave beyond their means. They gave sacrificially.

Second, they gave without being asked. They gave of their own accord. Nobody was begging them to give or trying to twist their arm. *They* were begging for the opportunity to give. I bet every ministry leader in the world would love to have more people like the Macedonians! No more guilt trips. No more year-end urgent appeals. Instead people begging you to take their money.

But not only that, third, they also saw giving as a privilege. They asked for the favor or the grace of participating in the relief of the saints. They wanted to serve those in need because they were a part of the body of Christ. It wasn't a chore; it was a privilege.

Fourth, it wasn't simply because they felt pity for the church in Jerusalem. Verse 5 says that they did what nobody expected. They gave out of devotion to Christ and his church. They gave themselves first to the Lord! This act of giving was worship for them. It was intimately connected with their relationship with God.

And, fifth, they not only gave their money, they also gave their time and talent. That's what Paul means when he says they gave themselves to us. They said, "We'll give you what little money we have, but we can help in any other way you need help too."

Hopefully the applications for us are clear enough. What a challenge to give as an overflow of joy! What if we saw giving as a privilege and an act of devotion to Christ? Does our giving come from a desire to build up the body (or just for tax deduction)? And do we give our time and talent as well as our treasure? Maybe there are some of you here who are being challenged to give sacrificially.

But giving out of poverty is clearly meant to be an extraordinary example of generosity. This is an extreme case. So what led to this sacrificial giving? Verse 1 says that it was all because of the grace of God that was given among the churches of Macedonia.

The grace of God here is referring to God's work in the hearts of the Macedonians. It was God who gave them the desire to give sacrificially and the ability to give sacrificially.<sup>2</sup> It was God who motivated their giving. God is gracious and generous to us. That's what caused them to be gracious and generous to others.<sup>3</sup> In Randy Alcorn's book, *The Treasure Principle*, it says, "As thunder follows lightning, so giving follows grace."

They weren't motivated by manipulation. It wasn't through the fancy sales pitch of their spiritual leaders or a stewardship series. They were motivated and enabled to give because of God's grace. That's what led to this extraordinary and extravagant example of giving.<sup>4</sup>

But Paul's not even calling for an extraordinary act of giving. He's calling for a quite ordinary act of giving. He's making a greater to lesser argument. So what exactly is Paul calling for?

## **A CALL FROM PROSPERITY (6-15)**

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We've seen a case from poverty. Let's look now at Paul's call to give from prosperity. I already said the Corinthians were prosperous. They had an abundance of resources (v. 14). But in what ways were they prosperous? I see two things in our passage. They were spiritually and materially prosperous. And Paul is trying to teach them that spiritual and material privilege should lead to

<sup>2</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary

<sup>3</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries

<sup>4</sup> Harris

appropriate stewardship. He's not calling for extraordinary giving, just a basic stewardship of their many privileges.

### *Spiritual Privilege*

Their spiritual privilege comes out in verses 7-8. Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 7, "you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you." Literally, it should read, "you overflow in everything." The Corinthians are overflowing spiritually. And Paul wants their spiritual maturity to overflow into generous giving as well. They were spiritually privileged. But with great privilege comes great responsibility. There's a stewardship involved.

They had faith in Christ, they had knowledge of Christ, and they were capable of speaking and teaching about the grace of God. They also had love. The ESV says you excel in our love for you. But it should probably read, "You excel in *your* love that comes *from* us." What that means is that they had love for God and others *as a result of* Paul's ministry among them.<sup>5</sup>

But here's the thing. They still needed to show that love to others. They needed to prove their love was genuine (v. 8). They had knowledge of the gospel. And they could declare the gospel with eloquence. But they needed to demonstrate the gospel in their lives. They could share about the generosity or grace of God. But they needed to show the generosity of God in their generosity to others. Their spiritual prosperity needed to overflow in giving.

I think we're a lot like the Corinthians. We have a deep faith here at First Free. There are hundreds of people in this church who have been walking with Jesus for many years. We have a deep knowledge of the gospel here too. And we're known for teaching and preaching the Bible. We also have a lot of spiritually gifted people here. But are we known simply for our knowledge and our gifts? Or are we also known for applying the knowledge we have? We're gospel-centered at First Free. But do we demonstrate the gospel? Is the gospel seen in our giving?

I think we've been blessed with faithful giving over the years. So, I don't want to bag on First Free for not being generous. We should thank God for our legacy of giving at First Free. But we are starting to see a trend of lower giving or even no giving. Why is that? I'll touch on some possible reasons later in the sermon, but for now I want to think about connections with the gospel. Could it be that even though we're a church that's known for being mature followers of Jesus that we don't quite understand the depths of Jesus' generosity?

Paul says in verse 9, "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 by his poverty might become rich."

Jesus knew privilege in a way we can't even grasp. He's God. He's all knowing and all powerful. He created the universe and upholds it by the word of his power. He is glorious beyond compare. And rich beyond all measure. And yet the story of the gospel is a riches to rags story. From his place of privilege and power, Jesus became poor. He took on flesh. He suffered. He died on the cross for our sins. He became poor so that we might become rich—rich in eternal life and forgiveness of sins.

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<sup>5</sup> Harris

If we are followers of Jesus, we're called to do what he did. And as somebody once said, "We're most like Jesus when we're giving."<sup>6</sup> Because Jesus gave it all! Generosity is fueled by grace, the grace of God seen in Jesus Christ.

So, with this in mind, I think we need to ask a question this morning. And it's not a question for *you*, those listening to my sermon. It's a question for *us*, me included. We say we're gospel-centered. We say we want the gospel to grow deep in us. Well, how deep has it grown in us when it comes to giving? Do we give out of the overflow of our spiritual privilege? Is Jesus seen on our bank statements and our tax returns?

I know this is a high calling. The example of the Macedonians giving out of their poverty. The example of Jesus becoming poor. It may lead some of you to despair. But Paul lets the air out of the balloon in the rest of the passage. He's not calling us to become poor through our giving. He's simply calling us to steward what we have.

### ***Material Privilege***

You see, the Corinthians were not only spiritually prosperous. They were also materially prosperous. And they may have thought their giving would result in them going without. But Paul clarifies his call to them. He tells them that their giving will be acceptable if they will give in proportion to what they have. He's not calling them to give according to what they don't have (v. 12). It's not like they're going to become burdened so that others can live at ease. He simply wants there to be fairness (v. 13).

The Corinthians have abundance. Again, literally this should read, they have overflow. They have more than they need. It only makes sense that they would give to others in need.

And not only that. They had also already said they wanted to give and were going to give (vv. 10-11). They simply needed to stay true to their word. They needed to be ready to give, or even eager to give, if for no other reason than to fulfill their commitment to give.

### ***Application***

How does all of this apply to us? Hopefully it motivates some of you toward extravagant giving. And I pray that God's grace would enable that kind of giving in more of us. But at a minimum this passage simply gives us a baseline for giving. Some basic principles for giving. I'd like to share a few.

For one, motivation matters. We should delight to give. There should be a desire to give. We should have an eagerness to give. And we should be motivated by the gospel. Giving should be motivated by a love for God and a love for others, all because he first loved us.

But there is also a duty to give. We need to make a decision to give. We need to be ready to give. We need to commit to giving. And then we need to fulfill our commitments for giving. We're also called to give in proportion to our income. Now that doesn't mean that those who have limited income don't have to give at all. I think the Macedonians taught us that those with hardly anything should at least give something. And those with abundance are called to give much more. We're not given a percentage in this passage. But we're given a principle we need to take to heart.

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<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle*

Many of you agree with me on these points. You have a desire to give and you want to fulfill your duty to give. But there are many things in the way of that desire and duty. You simply have too many bills to pay. For some of you that's no fault of your own. Maybe you've been laid off or you have a pile of medical bills. But for many people the desire and decision to give is crowded out by the desire and decision to spend. You spent more than you had and now you're strapped with debt. And most of your "giving" goes to the bank. I know what that's like!

If that's where you find yourself today, I would like to encourage you to take a class on biblical money management. Biblical money management can help you clear the path to generosity. It can help you have a readiness to give, as Paul speaks of. We've offered Compass or Crown courses at this church for years which teach biblical principles for managing your money. George Fooshee says at one time there were over 400 people in this church who had gone through Crown or Compass. I suspect that number is much lower now. But we are offering Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace class after the first of the year. I would encourage you to sign up for that class.

We should all have a desire to give. And if there are road blocks in the way of fulfilling that desire, we need to do what it takes to remove them from our lives so that we can give out of our overflow!

### ***Conclusion***

This passage has taught us that giving is all about overflow. We should give out of an overflow of joy. A joy that shows that what we have in Christ is more important than what we have or don't have in this life. And out of a realization that all we have comes from God. We should give out of an overflow of our abundant spiritual blessings. We need to realize that we are a church that is blessed spiritually. And that spiritual blessing needs to be stewarded in service and giving. We should give from the overflow of our material blessings. We are so rich in comparison to the rest of the world. We should realize that one reason God has given us wealth is so we can take care of the spiritual and physical needs of others.

I pray our legacy as a church would not only be our biblical knowledge, but our application of the gospel. That the overflow of grace would overflow in generosity.