

Giving as Grace

2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15

This morning we continue our short series looking at what we're calling gospel-fueled stewardship. Giving to the Lord's work financially. And I want to start with the same caveats I started with last week, in case you weren't here.

We're not talking about giving for a few weeks because that's what we always talk about. This is not a frequent subject from the pulpit, though it certainly comes up in Scripture quite a bit, and therefore we do talk about it from time to time. Nor am I talking about giving because we're in some sort of financial crisis right now; we're not. Nor is it because we're in the middle of some sort of major fundraiser; again, we're not. We took our Thanksgiving offering today, which we do every year on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. But that's not part of some major fundraising campaign. Nor am I talking about giving because I'm disappointed in what some of you give; I don't know what anybody gives. I don't see those numbers, nor do I want to.

We're talking about giving for a few weeks for one simple reason: *because giving is an essential part of Christian discipleship*. As we saw last week, how we spend or invest our money on earth is ultimately a matter of worship. Where our treasure is—that's where our heart will be. You cannot serve both God and money. And so how we spend our money exposes the true master of our hearts. It's a matter of worship.

But we were also left with several questions. How much should we give? How do we allocate that giving among many good causes? What should motivate our giving? What's the ultimate goal of giving? In what manner do we give? We're going to try and answer a few more of those this morning as we look together at 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and *the grace of giving*—that when the grace of God in Jesus grips our lives, it produces willful, joyful, and generous giving as a result.

Second Corinthians is obviously not the first letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. And the church in Corinth was not the easiest church that Paul had to work with. They were fraught with problems, and one of them was the temptation to follow a group of false teachers whom Paul calls the "super-apostles." He's mocking them, because their ministry and message are all about their own power, performance, and popularity (2:17; 3:1; 4:2; 10:10; 11:7, 19-20). The message of the cross—of life through death, grace through suffering—that's weakness. They questioned Paul's legitimacy as an apostle because of how weak and ineloquent and prone to suffering he was. And some in the Corinthian church were buying it. Which wasn't a big deal because they were rejecting Paul, but because they were rejecting the gospel of Jesus that he preached.

And so the central aim of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians was to defend his apostolic authority, and the apostolic message of God's grace in Christ. He starts the letter by discussing the recent conflicts they've encountered (1:1-2:13), and then makes a case for his apostolic ministry and the place of suffering in it (2:14-6:10). Then he takes a more positive and affirming tone. In chapters 6-7, he acknowledges those who have already repented, and he encourages them to keep going. To open their hearts to Paul and the apostles in earnestness and love, and to walk in obedience to God (6:11-7:16). And the chief example of their earnest love, the "proof" of their "love" as he puts it in ch. 8, is to complete the collection that they've been taking for the relief of Christians in Jerusalem who have been facing poverty and persecution.

At the end of his first letter, Paul encouraged the Corinthians: "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem" (1 Cor. 16:1-3; cf. Gal. 2:9-10; Rom 15:25-28). Here in 2 Corinthians 8-9 he returns to this subject—the collection of a relief fund for the Jerusalem church.

It's important to understand the context. These chapters do not talk about regular giving to a local church, or about tithing; this collection is for a one-time gift to another church in need (cf. Rom. 15:35-38; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; Gal. 2:9-10). But, though the context is specific, Paul's instructions here do offer us one of the clearest portraits of what ought to drive the church's financial giving under the new covenant in Christ—namely, the gospel of God's grace.

Our giving, as Paul describes it here, is marked by grace from beginning to end. He uses the word "grace" 10 times in these two chapters. He even uses the word to describe the very act of giving itself. Look at:

- 8:1: "We want you to know, brothers, about the *grace* of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." He's talking about their generous collection.
- 8:4: They were "... begging us earnestly for the favor [or *grace*] of taking part in the relief of the saints."
- 8:6: "we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of *grace*" —the Corinthians' participation in the relief.
- 8:7: "... see that you excel in this act of *grace* also."
- 8:19: This brother "... has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of *grace* that is being ministered by us"

Giving is not just worship, it is *grace* according to Paul. So what does that mean? What does that look like? What we're going to do is look at three things here: the motivation for giving, the manner of giving, and the source and goal of giving, each of which is dominated by grace. And we'll define what we mean by "grace" as we look at the first point, the motivation for giving.

The Motivation for Giving: God's Grace

Why give generously? Where does that come from? As Paul instructs the Corinthians to follow the example of the Macedonian churches and complete this act of grace—of giving—he anchors that instruction in their own experience of God's grace. Look at v. 9: Complete your act of grace, excel in this act of grace, “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.”

Why give graciously to God? Because he has dealt graciously with us in Jesus. He has given us not just something we don't deserve, but the opposite of what we deserve, at great cost to self. That's what we mean by the word “grace”; that's how Paul uses it. Look at how he describes it here in v. 8: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.” God's grace is costly, it's not free. It cost Jesus everything. And he's not talking about money here, he's talking about how Jesus said aside his glory in heaven to humble himself and step into his own creation, to live for us the life we couldn't live and wouldn't live—a life of perfect fellowship and faithfulness to God—and then take on himself our sin and weakness, bearing the very wrath of God in our place through his death on the cross. All the glorious riches of heaven, traded in for the most shameful, excruciating death on earth. And he did it for us—“though he was rich, *yet for your sake* he became poor, so that *you* by *his* poverty might become rich”—again, spiritually speaking. Jesus lost everything in order to give us everything. That's grace. He took the punishment we deserved, that we might get reward he earned. So it's costly; it's not cheap. But it's freely given; it's freely received. We can't earn it. We can't pay him back. It's ours for free through faith in Jesus. God, in Jesus, gives us something wonderful when we actually deserve something terrible, and he can do that because Jesus took the terrible in our place. That's grace.

And when you experience that grace—when you realize how horrible your sin is, how much you actually deserve his holy justice, and yet how merciful God is, and how unspeakably loving Jesus is to take our place and give us his righteousness—when you experience that grace, you can't help but respond in kind, and give graciously to God. The joy of salvation will allow no other course.

Think of the Dickens' classic, *A Christmas Carol*. It's a parable of grace. This greedy, miserly man who is rotten to everyone is allowed to see what he's forsaken from his past, what he's neglecting in the present, and where he's going in the future, and upon realizing that's he's been given another chance—something wonderful even though he deserved something terrible—what's he do? He responds in kind, *with grace*. Grace that expresses itself in generous giving.

Or just look at the example of the Macedonian churches and their participation in the collection, which is where Paul starts in 2 Corinthians 8. (Macedonia was the region north of Achaia, which is where Corinth was.) Verse 1: “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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” (8:1-2). Now look at how he describes the circumstances among the churches in Macedonia. *A severe test of affliction + abundant joy + extreme poverty = a wealth of generosity*. Now I don't know about you, but I'm not sure how that math works. Severe affliction and extreme poverty do not typically add up to a wealth of generosity. Those are negative factors, right? But then there's this positive factor in the middle—abundance of joy. And that abundant joy is so much stronger than

severe affliction and extreme poverty, that it doesn't just cancel them out, it overflows into a wealth of generosity.

Where does this abundant joy come from? From their experience of God's grace. As Scott Hafemann writes, "For Paul, the basis of giving to others is not what they have done or will do for us, but what *God* has already done for us in Christ. The foundation of giving is God's grace."¹ Gracious giving is motivated by our own experience of God's grace.

So think about your own life. How real is the grace of God to you in your experience? And I'm not talking about what you believe on paper. I'm talking about how you operate, how you actually relate with God. How necessary is God's grace in your relationship? Do you view your relationship with God like you're doing him a favor, like spending time with an elderly aunt that you pop in on every few weeks because it's a good thing to do? Or is it more like dealing with a customer service agent that you're trying to convince to do their job—look I paid that bill, you need to fix my service. Or do we see our relationship with God as humble privilege, like a young man whose carelessness resulted in a car accident and the death of his friend, only to be forgiven and accepted into his friend's family?

When you've experienced that kind of grace—to be given so much though we deserve just the opposite—that changes you. You can't help but respond in kind, to give as we've received. Gracious giving is fueled by our own experience of God's grace.

But what should that giving actually look like? How do we give? The second thing I want to look at here is the manner of giving.

The Manner of Giving: Proportionate, Willful, Joyful, Generous

As Paul exhorts the Corinthians to complete their contribution to this relief effort, he doesn't just tell them why to give, but also *how* to give. And we see four characteristics of giving in these verses: our grace-fueled giving should be *proportionate*, *willful*, *joyful*, and *generous*.

Proportionate Giving. What do we mean by proportionate? It means we give according to what we have, not according to what we don't have. Those are Paul's instructions in ch. 8:11-12: "So now finish doing it as well [the gift], so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it *out of what you have*. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to *what a person has*, not according to what he does not have."

Probably the first question most of us ask when we think about giving is "how much?" What's interesting is that nowhere in the New Testament is that question answered in terms of any percentage or amount. Under the Old Covenant, Israel had a tithe system—they were to give a tenth of their produce and livestock to the Lord (cf. Lev. 27; Num. 18; Deut. 14; 26). And a lot of Christians will apply that today as a model or a baseline. And I think that's a fine principle, but we can't push it too far. The New Testament simply doesn't say that; it's not one of the laws of Israel that's reiterated under the new covenant. As we're going to see, the New Testament doesn't focus on the amount, it focuses on the heart of the giver. The only thing we can say about the amount is that we give according to what we have, not according to what we don't have.

¹ Scott Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 342 (italics mine).

Which means the more you have, the more you should give (cf. 8:13-15). The less you have, the less you'll be able to give (though God may move you sometimes to give beyond your means, as he did the Macedonians, cf. 8:3). But *everyone* should give. It's a command. It's not that those who have a lot should give, and those who have little don't have to. Everyone should give. But you give proportionately, according to what you have, not according to what you don't have. As Paul says in ch. 9:7: "Each one must give *as he has decided in his heart . . .*" When you consider the grace of God in Christ, what is God leading you to give?

Willful Giving. Second, we give willfully. We give to God out of genuine desire. Not guilt, or duty, or under compulsion or coercion. If you look at 8:10-11, Paul acknowledges their *desire* to give. They want to do it, so he encourages them to follow through and complete it. At the beginning of ch. 9, he encourages them to finish the collection and have it ready to go for when his friends get there, partly because he's been bragging on them about their readiness and desire to give and he doesn't want anyone to look foolish, but also because he wants to make sure they're giving willfully. Chapter 9:5: "So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a *willing* gift, not as an exaction." This is not a tax. They're not paying dues. This is a willing gift to the Lord. Again, 9:7: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not . . . under compulsion . . ."

Joyful Giving. Third, gospel-fueled giving is joyful giving. This gets back to what we were talking about earlier, how the abundant joy of the Macedonians overflowed into a wealth of generosity (8:2). It's possible to give willfully out of what you have, but do it grudgingly. Or reluctantly. Nobody's holding a gun to my head; nobody's forcing me to give, but I'd personally rather spend it on something else. Again, think of Scrooge at the beginning of the story. That's not the kind of heart God is looking for in our giving. Rather, think again of the churches in Macedonia who *begged* Paul for the grace of sharing in the relief of the saints (8:3-4). It was a joyful privilege to them, even in their extreme poverty, to give to those in need. Once again, consider ch. 9:7: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, *not reluctantly* or under compulsion, for God loves a *cheerful* giver." God's people give with joy that's fueled by the gospel of God's grace.

Generous Giving. Finally, in terms of how we give, God's people should give generously. Bountifully. As God has been generous to us in Christ.

There are four words that form a bracket or bookend around these two chapters (they appear at the beginning and the end): grace, overflow, generosity, and give or gift (8:1-2 // 9:12-15). That sums it up: God's grace overflows in us, resulting in generous giving.

So what counts as generous? Again, Paul doesn't give us an amount. Rather, as Scott Hafemann notes, "Paul leaves the amount of their giving up to the Corinthians, convinced that, as a new creation in Christ (5:17), the quantity of their giving will match the quality of their changed hearts (5:15)."²

² Scott Hafemann, 341.

For the Macedonians, that meant giving according to their means and beyond (8:2-3). For the Corinthians, it means *excelling* or *abounding/overflowing* (same word) in this act of grace (8:7). Again, as Hafemann explains, “The point here is not how much one gives, but that one gives *as freely as possible* . . .”³ Think of it this way: giving generously is what you do when you love someone. It’s amazing how whenever our kids have a birthday, we always find ourselves trying to stretch the budget we set for their gift as much as we can. We always set a certain amount, and then invariably, we’re like, ‘What if we just add this? Even if it means we have to go without that?’ Why do we do that? Because in our love, we want to give as much as possible. That’s why Paul’s their giving a chance to “prove” their “love” for Christ and his church in ch. 8:8 and 24—generosity comes from love.

But he sums up his call to generosity in ch. 9:6: “The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” For the last two summers, there have been large patches in our yard where I’ve had to replant grass seed. And both times, I’ve sowed sparingly. You buy that bag at Lowes and it’s like \$30 for a few pounds of grass seed. And so I’m trying to dole it out carefully, trying not to use any more than necessary. In fact I always have some left over, that I put it back in the shed . . . where it rots. Can you guess what those patches of grass looked like each time? A little bit of grass, and a whole lot of weeds. Imagine how different it would be had I been generous with the seed, instead of stingy? Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; whoever sows bountifully, or as a matter of blessing, will also reap bountifully, as a matter of blessing.

And the point here isn’t about reaping material blessing. Giving in order to get. That’s the lie of the prosperity gospel, and it simply cannot be squared with the Bible, especially 2 Corinthians, which is all about how God’s grace is sufficient for us in the midst of weakness, poverty, affliction, and suffering.

Again, this is a spiritual matter. God promises to provide for his children, but that provision doesn’t mean we will avoid suffering or hardship. *It means we’ll never be without Christ in the midst of it.* But you won’t know that, you won’t taste that or enjoy it, if you’re too busy holding onto your possessions on earth, safely doling out just enough to make sure we’ve got some left when we’re done . . . so it can rot. Jesus didn’t shed his blood sparingly, measuring out just enough to cover us but nothing extra. He shed it all. He gave his life.

And so the grace we experience in Christ motivates us to reflect that grace in how we give: proportionately, willfully, joyfully, and generously. As Kent Hughes summarizes, “Such is the grace of giving. It is not dictated by ability. It has nothing to do with being well-off. It is willing. It views giving as a privilege. It is joyously enthusiastic.”⁴

But how is it possible? I mean, I see the motivation; I see the manner; but it’s still hard. How is this kind of generosity possible for me? How do I find the strength to actually let go? To trust God and give generously? And to what end? What do we actually accomplish through our giving? Is it just helping people, or paying bills? What does grace-fueled giving actually do?

That brings us to our final point, the source and the goal of giving: from grace to grace.

³ Hafemann, 366 (italics mine).

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 158.

The Source and Goal of Giving: Grace to Grace

After that key verse that we kept coming back to in ch. 9:7—“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful give”—right after that, Paul tells us how this is possible, and what it’s all for. And as you might guess, his answer to both of those questions is *grace*.

Chapter 9:8: “And God is able to make all *grace* abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.” How is generous, joyful giving possible? For the same reason that anything we do for God is possible—it’s all a result of his grace. Grace is not just the motivation for our giving, it’s the power for our giving. God is at work in our lives, by his mercy, to supply all that is needed to do his will in each and every circumstance.

Paul anchors this point in Psalm 112 (v. 9; cf. Ps. 112:9), and then says in v. 10: “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be *enriched* in every way to be *generous* in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God” (9:10-11). Our ability to be generous is a result of God’s grace. It all belongs to him; it all comes from his hand; he’s generously given to us; it’s not ours to hold onto; we can freely give it back to him.

And when we do, if you notice the end of v. 11, the result is thanksgiving to God. Generous giving fueled by the gospel results in thanksgiving and glory to God. And the word that Paul uses twice in our passage to express that thanksgiving is—wait for it—*grace*. When he says “thanks be to God in 8:16 and 9:15, the word translated “thanks” there is grace.

Paul summarizes the goal, what their giving actually accomplishes, in 9:12-15:

For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others,¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

Kent Hughes says it well: “Giving is a matter of grace from beginning to end.”⁵ We’re motivated by grace, we reflect God’s grace in the way we give, we depend on grace to do it, and we aim at the grace that wells up in thanksgiving to God.

What we must understand from this is that Paul’s call to ready, willing, generous giving is not a call to reach down deep within our beings and rise to the best that is within us. Rather, it is a call to authentically come to Christ in true belief and repentance. It is a call to contemplate Christ’s giving as the example for our giving — his embrace of poverty that we might become rich. It is not a call to legalistic observance but to grace.⁶

⁵ Hughes, 160.

⁶ Hughes, 176.

Last week I gave just two applications: to take a fresh look at Jesus in all his worthiness, and take a fresh look at how you spend your money—to see if they match, what your spending reveals about your heart. I'm going to give you two more this week. First, in light of the gospel of God's grace, ask yourself, What do I want to give? *On the basis of the gospel*—not 'selfish me,' but in light of God's grace, what do I *want* to give? What am I deciding in my heart with respect to willful, joyful, generous giving? That's the first one. The second is to then prepare yourself to give it. What do I need to do to be ready so that my desire may be matched by completing the gift out of what I have (8:11)? That may mean changing some of my habits, or organizing some things differently. *What do I need to do to be ready to give what I want to give in light of God's grace?* Because when the grace of God in Jesus grips our lives, it produces willful, joyful, and generous giving.