

The Joy of Giving: Romans 15:22-33
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 Sunday, November 16th, 2014

We're going to finish Romans 15 today as we focus on the theme of joyful giving. We've seen Paul's passion for frontier missions. The particular call on his life was to preach the Gospel where Christ had not yet been named. That's why he's so eager to get to Spain. He had already preached throughout the regions between Jerusalem and Illyricum. Now he wants to head further west. He hopes to get to Spain. We don't actually know if he ever got there or not. At record in the book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome. There are some indications from other historical sources that he may have made it to Spain, but we can't be sure.

What's remarkable, though, about Paul's travel plans is that he also has a firm commitment to return to Jerusalem with a collection he's been gathering from the Gentile churches. I find this fascinating. Paul had a commitment to the unreached, Gentile peoples. But he also had a commitment to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, a place where the Gospel had already taken root. Paul was certainly focused on the unique mission God had called him to. He was the apostle to the Gentiles, called to be a pioneer missionary. But that did not mean he forsook the needs of the established church back home.

I'm going to read this passage in Romans 15, and then we're going to focus on one particular aspect of it. If you remember, a month ago when I returned from my trip to Turkey, I preached on Romans 15:30-33 – How to pray for a missionary. So I'm not going to cover those verses today. I want to focus on the point here about the churches which generously gave to provide for the needs of their brothers and sisters in Christ. And to do so, we'll also be spending some time in 2 Corinthians 8-9, where Paul discusses this same collection.

The Example of the Macedonians

In verse 26 mentions the churches in Macedonia and Achaia which have made contributions for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Macedonia would have included the churches in . . . Achaia would have included the churches in Corinth . . .

And notice the very important point that Paul makes here, that they were *pleased* to do this. He mentions this in verse 26 and 27.

To get the broader context of this, let's compare this passage to some of the things Paul says in 1-2 Corinthians.

Another place where Paul writes about this collection is at the end of 1 Corinthians. He instructs the church: "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 Corinthians 16:1-3)

So there are these Jewish believers in Jerusalem who have fallen on very hard times. And it's Paul's desire to gather whatever resources he can from the various churches and bring it to Jerusalem.

Here Paul is exhorting the Corinthians (in Achaia) concerning this collection. And he's using the Macedonian church as a positive example of joyful giving. He's telling this to the Corinthian church, not to create rivalry and not to manipulate, but to encourage them. He wants the church in Corinth to see the grace and the joy of the Macedonian church in the hope that the Corinthian church will be spurred on by it. Paul wants that grace and joy to overflow in all the churches. And his main objective is not the amount he's able to provide to the saints in Jerusalem. That's important to him, but his pastoral concern is not so much about the amount as it is about the motivation. He wants to be clear that Christian generosity flows from God's grace poured out on us, and Christian generosity is for the purpose of God's glory. There are many mentions of grace throughout these two chapters, and there are also references to the glory of the Lord (8:19) and the glory of God (9:13). Biblical generosity is by God's grace and for God's glory. It's only possible as a result of God's gracious work in our lives, and it's for the purpose of showing the beauty of God's greatness.

Notice in 8:1 that before Paul even mentions the Macedonians, he first speaks of the grace of God. Paul does want to lift up the Macedonians as a positive example. But he's in no way praising the Macedonians. He is praising God. He is thanking God for this amazing work that He has done. Paul is acknowledging a profound evidence of grace in the life of the Macedonian church. "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." That's a God-centered, God-glorifying way of describing the situation. Paul doesn't look at the amazing generosity of these folks and say, "Wow, what good-hearted people they are!" No, he says, "Wow, God's grace is amazing!"

Look at how amazing God's grace is. We know this must be the grace of God, because everything about these circumstances would incline these people away from generosity. Look at how Paul describes it in verse 2—"a severe test of affliction" . . . "extreme poverty." Now, what kinds of things come to mind that

would typically accompany a severe test of affliction and extreme poverty? We might expect for there to be requests for help, and that would certainly be legitimate. We wouldn't be surprised if there was much discouragement or even deep depression as they labored to endure the trial.

But that's what is so shocking about these verses. The severe test of affliction and extreme poverty is accompanied by the exact opposite of what we would expect. Verse 2, "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." Who has ever heard of a severe test of affliction and abundance of joy going together in the same sentence? Who has ever heard of extreme poverty and a wealth of generosity overflowing from the same group of individuals? That's the amazing grace of God!

Paul continues to describe the characteristics of their generosity, and it's further testimony of how radically they have been changed by God's grace. He writes in verse 3, "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means . . ." In other words, they gave extremely generously, even as they were struggling to make ends meet. Others may have looked at them and said, "Why are you giving so much stuff away? You need that stuff!" They gave what they could give, and they even gave (what some might have said) they couldn't afford to give. They gave beyond their means.

They also gave "of their own accord." Paul wasn't there trying to squeeze it out of them. "Come on, I know you have more stuff where that came from. You can do better than that!" Giving beyond their means was not motivated by Paul's heavy-handedness, or anyone else's heavy-handedness. They gave voluntarily. They wanted to do this. And that's what would have left people scratching their heads. You can envision people parting with their possessions if someone is forcing them to do it—whether that be the government or a thief. But to voluntarily give your stuff away, and to give in such a radical way like this, that's just not normal.

They gave voluntarily. But not only voluntarily, also eagerly. It was of their own accord, and with a passion! Verse 4, "begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—" (2 Corinthians 8:4) That word translated "favor" is the Greek word *charis* which is grace. This is another occurrence of that same word that is sprinkled throughout these verses. Their generosity was enabled and motivated by God's grace, and the Macedonians recognized that it was a grace to them to have the opportunity to give. It would not only be a grace to the needy saints in Jerusalem, it was also a grace to the Macedonians, even as they gave beyond their means in the midst of a severe test of

affliction. They were not just doing a favor for those in Jerusalem. They saw this as a favor done to them, to take part in the relief of the saints. Do you see that in verse 4? The favor, the grace, is what the Macedonians are wanting for themselves. And the favor is not to receive material things, but to give away material things. They were begging Paul for this grace. “Please, Paul, let us give more. Please, let us participate in this collection. Please, we want to help. We love to give. It makes us so happy to be part of the global body of Christ in this way.” That’s not normal. That’s the grace of God.

In verse 5 Paul confesses that he didn’t expect this kind of action on their part. He was somewhat surprised by this. They far exceeded his expectations. Again, a testimony to God’s gracious work in their lives. And then Paul makes a very important statement in the second part of verse 5, that “they gave *themselves* first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” This is not just about finances. This is not just about giving away some of your money or some of your stuff. It’s about giving *yourself* to the Lord. Paul says that the Macedonians, in their generosity, were giving themselves to the Lord. And one way they were doing this was through their support of Paul’s ministry, and specifically this collection that Paul was making. The mention of “the will of God” there connects this back to God’s grace. All of this is by God’s grace, by the will of God. The Macedonians don’t get the ultimate credit for this. God does.

When I read this passage, the person who jumps to my mind is a pastor in Liberia. I met him during my trip there in 2011. His name is Dennis, and his wife is Theresa, and they live in a small town called Saclepea in the northern part of Liberia. They do not have much at all, compared to our standards. They live in a small house made of concrete blocks. They do their cooking over a small charcoal grill. Their water comes out of a hand-pumped well. They have a generator they run during the day, which is a luxury because they can use some electrical devices and also can run some fans, which is pretty nice when it’s 85-90 degrees all the time and extremely humid. I remember that Aaron Ashoff, whom I was visiting there, told me that I probably wouldn’t get a very good night’s sleep during our stay at Saclepea. And he was right. When it was time to go to sleep, I lay down under a bug net and tried to get comfortable, with the fan blowing on me. And just then the generator was turned off, the fan stopped, and I realized it was going to be a long, hot and muggy night.

The thing I remember about Pastor Dennis is that every time I saw him, he had a big smile on his face. He showed Aaron and me the church building they were working on. He took us to his farm where he grows beans and peanuts. And what struck me

most of all, and what makes me think of him when I read about the generosity of the Macedonians is that Pastor Dennis had such a desire to help others. There were refugees from the Ivory Coast who were settling near Saclapea, and Dennis was involved in organizing many of the pastors in the area to help those refugees. By God's grace, he embodied the statement in verse 2—his abundance of joy and extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

The grace of God in the lives of the Macedonians is one thing that Paul points to as he exhorts the Corinthians. Another thing Paul points to is the example of Jesus.

Proportionate Giving

Notice in verse 10 he mentions the Corinthians' *desire* to participate in this collection. Paul is reminding them of a commitment they made a year prior to this. They had started gathering resources for the Jerusalem church. And verse 10 focuses not just on the fact that they were doing this, but that they *wanted* to do it! That's very important for Paul. He mentions it again in verse 11. He's exhorting them to finish what they started, and he refers to their readiness in desiring it. He wants their readiness, their eagerness, their desire, to be completed by following through with this collection.

Then he clarifies the expectations. He has spoken of the Macedonians who gave not only according to their means but beyond their means. He now clarifies that he's not asking the Corinthians to match or try to outdo the Macedonians. He's asking something very simple. He's asking them to give out of what they have (end of verse 11). He's asking them to give according to what they have, not according to what they do not have (verse 12). He wrote in a similar way in 1 Corinthians 16:2, where he was giving them instructions about this same collection. He wrote, "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." That's proportionate giving. According to the measure of your prosperity, you give out of that. As you prosper, you give. Those who have less will give less. Those who have more will give more. The point is: give according to what you have.

What he's clearly not saying is that people should give away every last dime they have so that they become destitute and homeless. Verse 13, "I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened . . ." That's not the way this works. That's not what Paul is calling for. He knows that some folks might be suspicious of this collection, and so he wants to assure them that he's not trying to take all their money in order that the Jerusalem

saints might live in luxury. That's not what he's trying to do. He's not trying to make the Corinthian believers materially poor and make the Jerusalem believers materially rich.

He's not even trying to level the playing field. He doesn't have an ideal in his mind that every Christian should have the same amount of money, and so we need to distribute the money around until it's all even. Now, that could be a little confusing if your translation says "equality" at the end of verse 13 and the end of verse 14. But Paul is obviously not pushing for absolute financial equality among all the churches, because he is not here asking the Corinthians to give to the Macedonians. The Macedonians are in the midst of a severe affliction and are extremely poor. The Corinthians were not facing a hardship like that. But Paul is not asking the Corinthians to give to the Macedonians. Rather, he's asking the Corinthians and the Macedonians to give to the needy Jewish believers in Jerusalem. And he's telling them all to give according to what they have.

The ESV translates it "fairness," and that may be less confusing. The goal is not equality in the sense of financial uniformity. The goal is fairness. If there are believers who don't have basic necessities, then other believers should help them out. Those who have more than they need should give to those who have less than they need. That's the principle.

There's also a special dynamic between the Jewish believers in Jerusalem and these Gentile churches. The Jewish believers may have some desperate financial needs, but in terms of spiritual heritage and Christian leadership they have a lot to offer. So this seems to be a pretty fair exchange. The Gentiles have received spiritual blessings by way of the Jews, and now these Gentile churches have the opportunity to bless the Jewish believers with financial assistance.

Paul writes in this way in Romans 15 as well, another place where he talks about this collection. "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem [notice that theme again of *desiring* to give]. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them [Paul is saying that in some way the Gentile churches owe this contribution to the Jewish believers]. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings." (Romans 15:25-27)

This is fitting. This is appropriate. This is fair. And Paul wants the Corinthians to give *as they are able* in order to help the believers in need. He's asking for proportionate giving. The Macedonians gave very generously and sacrificially, but they still might not have actually given that much stuff. Even though they

gave beyond their means, they just didn't have a whole lot to give. But the Corinthians, on the other hand, at least some of them, could have been pretty well off. They had a surplus. They had excess that they could either use to make their own lives more and more comfortable, or they could give it away. And Paul is saying, that's what needs to happen. You need to give it away. Those who have more than they need should give that surplus to help those who don't have enough.

As Americans, it may be difficult for us to distinguish needs and wants. There are a lot of wants that we quickly begin to think of as needs. I don't have a simple solution to this. But my hope is that we will be more and more shaped by the Scriptures and have a passion for the things that God is passionate about, and that we will be loving and kind and sacrificial and generous like our Lord Jesus Christ. I hope that as the Lord provides for us that we would not be constantly on the look out for new ways to spend money on ourselves. The media is certainly very good at bombarding our minds with things we simply *have to buy!* I hope instead, by God's grace, we will be constantly on the look out for new ways to spend money on others—to help those in need, to be kind and generous to those around us, to support the church, to fund missions. So there's a question for you (and for me) to mull over this week. What do you really need? And what are some resources you have that you could use to bless others? Rather than turning inward and scheming about how you can spend it on yourself, look outside of yourself and strategize about how to make an eternal impact with your money and time and talents.

The elders in recent weeks have been discussing and strategizing about how we can use some of the surplus of the church's financial resources to bless others, to fund overseas missions as well as local ministries. We look forward to presenting some of those ideas to you at our year-end church meeting next month. Let's be praying about how we, corporately and individually, can give joyfully.

The Example of Jesus (verse 9)

In verse 9 Paul uses that same word again: grace. He writes of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And how do we see that grace? We see it in the fact that through he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. What an awesome statement of the Gospel we have here in this verse! This is the grace of the Gospel. This is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who possesses all riches and power and authority and honor, He made Himself nothing. He humbled Himself to become one of us. He stooped to our level, to live among us as one of us, and in order to die in our place. He

gave up the riches of His divine status and embraced the poverty of humanity.

Paul describes this at greater length in Philippians 2, where he is also exhorting us to emulate Christ's example in this way. He says, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [Generosity would certainly fall into that category of humility and selflessness, being focused on others rather than yourself]. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:3-8)

That's the poverty that Jesus entered into on our behalf. The poverty of the incarnation—taking on human flesh. And the poverty of the cross—being shamed and humiliated and tortured and executed. He became poor. And Paul tells us in this verse (2 Corinthians 8:9) the purpose for which Jesus gave up His riches and became poor. The verse says, "so that you by his poverty might become rich." That's our salvation, brothers and sisters. That's the Good News of Christ's substitutionary atonement. He became our substitute. He who was rich, He who was perfect and sinless, He became utterly poor by taking our sin on His own shoulders. He bore our sin on the cross. For all those who repent and turn from their sins and put their eternal hope in Jesus Christ, that will be true of you. God will not condemn you to hell for your sins, but rather He punished Jesus on the cross for your sins.

That's how Christ's poverty makes us rich. We become spiritually rich. To be forgiven by God, to have access in prayer to the living God, to be reconciled to God, to have peace with God, these are riches that no amount of material wealth can compare to. Christ became poor, so that we might have these unspeakable riches, both in this life and forever in heaven.

Just a couple chapters earlier in this same letter, Paul wrote in a similar way about how Christ's sacrifice achieves our gain. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 he says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God made Christ to be sin, even though Christ was sinless. He credited our sin to Christ's account. And this happened so that in Christ we might be counted righteous. I hope this grips you this morning as it ought. This is the best news in the universe, and we need God to quicken our hearts to rejoice in it!

When we stand before God, let me tell you what we deserve. We deserve for Him to look at our track record, look at an exhaustive list of all our actions and thoughts, and tell us—“You have disobeyed me and dishonored me, and therefore you will be cast out of My presence forever.” That’s what we each deserve. But do you see what the Gospel is? The Gospel is that Jesus Christ stepped in and received that punishment in our place. Jesus bore the wrath of God in our place. And because of that, those who are united to Christ by faith are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, when God looks at us He doesn’t say, “Condemned sinner.” Instead He says, “I consider you to be perfectly righteous on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, and you are therefore welcome to enter my presence where you will spend all eternity.” That’s the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and I pray that if you have not already embraced this glorious truth, that you will today.

The way this connects with the topic of generosity is that we, as Christians, should desire to be generous like Jesus Christ is generous. Just like we should forgive because Christ forgave us, we should also be generous because Christ has been so generous to us. This is what grace does. When the grace of God invades your life, it changes you. It has such a profound impact on you that it begins reshaping your desires and actions.

And this is what we ought to be seeing in our lives if we are truly believers. We should see God’s grace changing us. It’s a painfully slow process, and we’re ever aware of our sin. But we can also see that we are not who we once were. We’re different. And the grace that has been shown to us, we desire to show to others. The forgiveness, the mercy, the kindness, the undeserved love, the patience, the generosity—all of these things that have been poured out on us by God, we want to make that known to others by acting in the same way toward them. This is a way of actually increasing our joy in what God has done for us.

When we’re so overwhelmed by the beauty of God’s greatness, when we’re in awe of His goodness to us, when we’re filled with joy because of what He has done, then we will want to share that with others. We’ll want to share it in our words and in our actions. Our joy in God will grow as we share it with others.

As I said at the beginning of this message, my desire is that we be a happy and generous church, for God will be glorified in this way. When we receive His grace and extend it to others, and as we are generous with joyful hearts, that says something very great about our God. These are evidences of His grace in our lives. Let’s ask for more of this grace, and may His Name be praised!