

The Grace of Giving: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
Sunday, March 4th, 2012

This Sunday, and for the next couple of weeks, we're going to look at a passage of Scripture that talks about giving and generosity. This is a topic we don't talk about a whole lot around here, and so I thought it would be good to do a short sermon series on 2 Corinthians 8-9. Right now we're in between two longer sermon series. At the end of 2011, I finished preaching through the Gospel of Mark. I'm planning to start Romans in the near future. And in the meantime we're doing a few shorter series. We looked at Luke 1-2 leading up to Christmas. We just finished Song of Solomon. We're now going to look at joyful giving. And then next we're going to go through Hosea. And after Hosea will be Romans.

Now, as we bring up the topic of giving, that may cause some of you to feel uncomfortable or annoyed or guilty. You may feel uncomfortable because you've been in church settings where there was a strong plea to give money, and you felt really put-off by that. You may be annoyed by the expectation that, as a Christian, you're called to be generous. You may feel guilty because you know you should be generous, but you feel like you're always falling short of that. You feel guilty about how you spend your money. You feel guilty about how little you give.

Others may have very different feelings when it comes to the topic of giving. For some, it may be a sense of pride or self-righteousness that rises up. It's the thought that "I give generously. I'm pretty sure I give a whole lot more than most people, and I feel really good about myself because of it."

What I hope this study will do is undermine all of those reactions to the issue of generosity. I don't want us to feel annoyed by this topic, wishing it never came up. I don't want us to feel burdened under the weight of guilt. Nor do I want us to feel puffed up when we are generous.

This passage of Scripture gives us a wonderful theological framework for generosity. The things that make biblical generosity possible are grace and joy. The grace of God works in our lives so that we desire to give, and we give cheerfully, not reluctantly or motivated by guilt.

And I also want to say at the outset here that I give thanks to God for how I see this in so many ways in our congregation. I have been so encouraged, over the years and even in recent weeks, to watch so many of you giving of your time and your energy and your talents and your resources. I think of Sunday School teachers, and small group leaders, and musicians, and guys who

run the sound system and website, and how the elders and deacons serve in so many selfless ways. I think of those who serve in the MOPS ministry to mothers and those who lead other women's ministries. I think of the hospitality of so many of you. I think evangelism and outreach efforts. I think of your faithful financial support that you give to the church. I don't know the amounts that anyone gives (and I don't want to have that information), but I'm certainly encouraged by your giving, and I'm very grateful for the church's support of me and my family. I count it a great privilege and honor and blessing to be part of the ministry here. It's also very exciting to know that we, as a church, are supporting various ministries and missionaries, both here in Pittsburgh and around the world.

Thinking of what's been going on here in the building these past couple of weeks, I have been blown away by the sacrificial labors of so many individuals who have worked on the ceiling in here. That is awesome to see! Many of you have been working on this building from the day we bought it, and it's certainly appreciated.

The thing that is most encouraging that I see in this church, and the thing that we're going to see in the text, is *joyful* giving, *cheerful* giving, *glad* giving, *gracious* giving. That's what excites me and blesses me in the ministry so much! I see people in this church who really want to do these things. It's not a burden, although at times it may be somewhat burdensome. It's not simply a chore. It's not something you hate to do, although it's not easy either. But these acts of service in the church and to others are things that you do voluntarily and even cheerfully. And in these ways your generosity is a profound evidence of God's grace.

I want to say these words of encouragement to you at the beginning, because I don't want you to think that I'm going to use this passage to beat you up about not giving more. I don't want you to think that I'm going to use this passage to manipulate you or guilt-trip you. That's not my intention at all, and that's not the intention of this passage of Scripture. I want us to be edified by these verses. I want us to see the joy of giving. I want us as a church to find more and more delight in giving of our money and our time and our talents. I want us to be a happy and generous church to the glory of God.

I've entitled the sermon this morning, "The Grace of Giving," because the word grace shows up so many times in these verses. Our generosity originates in God's grace to us, it's modeled after the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is an act of grace to others. This is all about grace. It's not simply a duty. It is certainly not a legalistic work that somehow earns God's favor. We are enabled to give and motivated to give as a result of God's

sovereign grace in our lives. He regenerates and changes us so that the things that make us most happy are very different than the things that used to make us most happy.

We also see the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for us, how He gave up everything to save us, and as we experience that grace coming to us through the cross, we desire to extend that kind of grace to others. His forgiveness of us makes us want to forgive others. His generosity to us makes us want to be generous toward others.

In these two chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul exhorts the church in Corinth about giving. For this morning, we'll take the first 15 verses, and we'll just look at 2 points. Paul builds his exhortation on two particular things in this section. First is the example of the Macedonian church (in verses 1-5). Second is the example of Jesus Christ (in verse 9). We'll look at each of these in turn.

The Example of the Macedonians (verses 1-5)

Paul, as he writes this letter to the Corinthians, wants to exhort them concerning a collection that he is gathering in order to help the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. He makes a reference to this in verse 4—"taking part in the relief of the saints." Paul writes about this collection in other places as well. 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)

He also writes about it in Romans 15, where he mentions both Macedonia and Achaia (Achaia being where Corinth is). He says that "Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. 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 15:26-27)

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.

Now, look at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 8 and see what Paul says about the Macedonian church. 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 last April. 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. I had taken a shower before bed just to try to cool down. Taking a shower there involves dumping a few buckets of water over your head—there’s no running water. And then 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. It wasn’t until the next morning I realized that Aaron had given me his only mat for me to sleep on. Aaron slept on the concrete floor.

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 Macedonians in 2 Corinthians 8, 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.

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!