

Grace Abounding in Giving, Part 1

2 Corinthians 8:1–6

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Introduction

We return this morning to our study on the Book of 2 Corinthians, so open your Bibles to that letter. And we come this morning to a new major section in 2 Corinthians, as we begin a series of expositions on chapters 8 and 9. And the chief theme that dominates these two chapters—and therefore which will be the theme of the next several sermons I’ll be preaching—is the theme of Christian giving.

And for those of you who may be visiting with us or who are new to GraceLife, you may be thinking, “Great! I finally get consistent in going to fellowship group and we can’t get through the first sermon series before the pastor’s trying to squeeze me out of my money!” Well, I assure you that that is not my intent, and those who have been regulars with us in GraceLife can confirm that for you. The reason for a sermon series on Christian giving has nothing to do with any perceived inadequacy in the church’s giving by the pastors and elders. Far from it! Our congregation—both in GraceLife and in Grace Community Church as a whole—is the most generous group of saints that I’ve ever known. The giving at this church has only consistently increased over the last several years. We continue to send new missionaries all over the world; we have more than 90 missionary families supported by Grace Church. We continue to receive donations for our benevolence fund, which meets the needs of members in our church who are going through difficult times. And even here in GraceLife, I hear story after story of Bible study members making their needs known to the group, and the saints taking up a collection to meet those practical needs. It is a great testimony to God’s grace at work in our church that our members can be so generous.

So if that’s the case, why am I doing a sermon series on giving? Well, the answer to that is simply that that’s what Paul talks about in this next section of 2 Corinthians! You see, we are committed to the consecutive, verse-by-verse exposition of the Scriptures. Because we believe that every word of Scripture is inspired, inerrant, infallible, authoritative, sufficient, and profitable, we preach on what the Bible says next! And in that way, it does not fall to the preacher to devise a scheme of topical messages to the congregation, but rather—through the providence of God—the Scriptures themselves set the agenda for what any given series of sermons will address. And in God’s providence, He has ordered it so that we come at this time to consider what His Word says on the matter of Christian giving. And I can only conclude that, in a church as generous as this, the Lord means for us to hear the exhortation to excel still more,

both in giving itself and in the gracious frame of heart which ought to be the spring of our giving on all occasions.

Now, Paul's transition to the subject of giving comes at a perfectly reasonable time in his letter to the Corinthians. As we've said multiple times, 2 Corinthians was written in the context of a conflict between the Apostle Paul and the Corinthians, who had been deceived by false teachers claiming to be apostles from the Jerusalem church. Their chief aim was to discredit the legitimacy of Paul's apostleship, because as long as the people believed his Gospel there was no room for their heresy. And sadly, the Corinthians were taken in by the false apostles' deceptions. They had begun to doubt Paul's sincerity and question his character. He attempted to put things to rights by making an ahead-of-schedule visit to Corinth, but when he got there an influential man in the church sided with the false apostles and openly insulted Paul before the entire congregation. And instead of defending Paul's character and the Gospel he preached to them, the Corinthians allowed this man's factiousness to go unchecked.

After this "sorrowful visit," Paul wrote the Corinthians a severe letter, sternly rebuking them for failing to properly deal with sin in the church, and for straying from his apostolic teaching and message. He sent Titus to bring the letter to Corinth, and then arranged to meet Titus to hear how the Corinthians responded. We hear about that report in chapter 7, verses 4 to 16. And we saw from that text that God sovereignly worked through Paul's severe letter, and through Titus's peacemaking ministry, so that the Corinthians repented of their sin and reaffirmed their love and loyalty to Paul. Verse 7 reports of their "longing, mourning, and zeal" for Paul. Verse 9 speaks of their being "made sorrowful to the point of repentance," and verse 11 describes several fruits borne of that genuine repentance, Verse 12 says that this whole episode had served to remind the Corinthians of their earnest love for Paul, and so Paul is comforted. He rejoices, verse 13, because their submissive response to Titus vindicated Paul's sure confidence in their obedience. And so he says in verse 4, "Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. I am filled with comfort; I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction." And again in verse 16, "I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you."

So now that Paul's relationship with the Corinthians is restored, and he has confidence in the Corinthians in everything, he's going to bring up this matter of the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem church. Now, the poverty of the church in Jerusalem had been an enormous concern for the Apostolic Church from the days of its inception. A great number of the 3,000 souls who were added to the church on the Day of Pentecost were pilgrims—men and women from all over the ancient world, visiting Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. When they saw the apostolic miracles and heard the apostolic Gospel, they knew that their place was with the church of Jesus Christ. And the only church in the entire world was the church in Jerusalem. They hadn't planned to move all their resources with them when they prepared for this pilgrimage. And so the overwhelming majority had left all that they'd owned to remain with the saints in Jerusalem.

On top of that, all of those first converts were Jews, whether by blood or by proselyte conversion. And similar to the Apostle Paul, who said in Philippians 3 that he suffered the loss of all things for the sake of Christ, these men and women undoubtedly faced immense persecution from their Jewish countryman as a result of their conversion Christ. One commentator writes, “They must have become, in consequence of their conversion, the victims of social and economic ostracism, ecclesiastical excommunication, and national disinheritance. Their business enterprises must in most cases have collapsed in ruins and family bonds been heart-breakingly severed” (Hughes, 284). And so it was inevitable that they would face material poverty.

And the care of the poor saints in the church was a high priority for Paul. When Peter, James, and John gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship and recognized Paul’s calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, the one thing they asked of Paul, Galatians 2:10, was to “remember the poor,” which, Paul says, was “the very thing I also was eager to do.” And that eagerness is illustrated by the fact that this isn’t the first time that Paul has spoken to the Corinthians about this collection for the saints. Back in 1 Corinthians, chapter 16, Paul speaks about organizing this collection among the churches of Galatia and calls the Corinthians to do the same. 1 Corinthians 16:1: “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.” And so this was an intentional, organized, multi-church effort to meet the needs of the saints in Jerusalem.

Soon after Paul wrote 2 Corinthians he wrote Romans, and he speaks of this ministry to the Jerusalem church in that letter as well. In Romans 15:25, he says, “Now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things.” In other words, this collection of financial resources from the Gentile churches on behalf of the Jerusalem church is a crystal-clear illustration of the spiritual unity in Christ that exists between Jew and Gentile. The spiritual union that is effected by the Gospel of Christ is illustrated by the fact that, in their *spiritual* need, Gentiles have come to share in the spiritual blessings of Jewish covenant promises. In the same way, that same spiritual unity will be illustrated by the fact that, in their *material* need, the Jewish Christians will share in the material resources of the Gentile churches. No matter what your ethnic background, the church belongs to one another! We are one body! One family of God! And therefore, the needs of those in the body of Christ are the needs of the entire body of Christ. And so this is a priority for Paul.

And we learn, from 2 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 6, and verses 10 and 11, that the Corinthians had begun to make preparations for this collection as early as a year prior. But with all of the commotion the false apostles had caused, the offering was delayed. And so the essence of Paul's instructions in chapters 8 and 9 is for the Corinthians to complete the collection that they had begun a year ago. Verse 10: You "were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability." And so the main point of these two chapters is: "Corinthians, complete the collection for the saints in Jerusalem."

But by the grace of God, these two chapters are not simply the historical record of correspondence between believers concerning a 2,000 year-old offering! Rather, from this interaction between Paul and the Corinthians, we are exposed to universal principles of Christian giving that are applicable to the church throughout all ages. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, we have the most detailed theology of Christian giving found anywhere in Holy Scripture.

And this is not at all out of place with respect to the overall theme of 2 Corinthians, which I've summarized as: joyful, enduring ministry in the midst of affliction. Throughout Paul's defense of his own apostolic authenticity against the attacks of the false apostles, he has taken pains to extensively define New Covenant Gospel ministry. And as we've worked through the first seven chapters of this letter, we have consistently applied Paul's comments on Christian ministry to each and every one of us, noting that if God has called you to salvation *by* the New Covenant, He has called to you to be a minister *of* the New Covenant, chapter 3 verse 6. If you have been saved through the *message* of reconciliation, you have been entrusted with the *ministry* of reconciliation, chapter 5 verses 18 and 19. We're all called to ministry—first to one another in the body of Christ and then to the lost who stand yet in need of Christ.

And we learn here in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 that *giving* financial resources to give aid to fellow Christians who are in need *is* ministry. In chapter 8 verse 4 he calls this enterprise, literally, "the ministry to the saints." He repeats the same phrase in chapter 9 verse 1, again calling it "this ministry to the saints." And then in chapter 9 verse 12, he adds to the word "ministry" a term that gets translated "service," which in the original language is a technical term for the priestly temple service of the Old Testament. And so, like the first seven, what we learn in these two chapters equips us for joyful, enduring ministry to one another in the body of Christ, even in the presence of the difficulties and afflictions that are sure to befall faithful servants of Jesus.

And as we come to the opening paragraph of these two chapters, we discover that Paul begins his appeal to the Corinthians to engage themselves in this ministry of Christian giving—he begins this detailed theology of Christian giving—not by pressing into their consciences the necessity of their duty, not by laying upon their shoulders the burden of apostolic commandments, and certainly not by manipulatively guiltning them into participation. He begins instead by informing

them of a concrete example of the grace of God at work, as evidenced by the generosity of the churches of Macedonia. Let's read our text for this morning. 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1 to 6: "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ²that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. ³For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, ⁴begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, ⁵and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. ⁶So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well."

And as we work through this text—which will take us both this morning and next week—we'll break it down across **four observations** concerning the Macedonians' giving, by whose example Paul aims to stir up the Corinthians to grace-fueled generosity. And as we examine the example of the Macedonians' giving, we will glean **several principles of Christian giving** that ought to inform how we think about money, and how we go about stewarding the financial resources that God has entrusted us with.

I. The Motivating Source (v. 1)

And that **first observation** that we can make from the Macedonians' example, is the **motivating source** of Christian giving. And that is: the grace of God. Verse 1: "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you **the grace of God** which has been given in the churches of Macedonia."

The Apostle Paul needs to stir up and exhort the Corinthians to sacrificial giving for the saints in Jerusalem. He needs to raise their affections for the needs of their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, whom in all likelihood they'd never met. And the way he begins—what he leads off with, what he wants resounding in their minds as the very foundation of all that he's going to say—is **the grace of God**. "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you"—not the crippling poverty of the saints in Jerusalem, not your spiritual obligation to provide for the material needs of your brethren, not laws and duties and commands and precepts—"Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God. We want to overwhelm you with the grace that God has poured out upon the churches of Macedonia! We want you to see His grace at work in their lives, and be motivated to aspire to that kind of grace-fueled generosity that has possessed them!"

And this brilliant on the part of the Apostle Paul. When someone announces that they're going to be delivering a sermon series on giving, how many people have the default reaction of shrinking back in their seats and saying, "Oh boy. Here comes the preacher after my money!" But to hear someone announce that they're going to be speaking about divine grace? What effect does that have on the people of God? They perk up, and lean forward, and say, "Grace? You mean, you're going to teach me something about grace? That's wonderful! I'm going to hear about the free,

unmerited favor and kindness of God to sinners? That unmerited favor that is expressed preeminently in the incarnation of the Son of God, who lived and died in my place to pay my debt of sin and to forgive me of all my iniquity? I *love* to hear about grace!”

For Paul, the only logical starting place for motivating the people of God to sacrificial, generous giving is the sacrificial, generous giving of *God* as manifested in all His works of grace! And grace is not just the starting place for giving; it is the scarlet thread woven throughout the fabric of these two chapters. Paul uses some form of the word for “grace”—in its various senses—no less than 12 times in these 39 verses! After here in verse 1, Paul says in verse 4 that the Macedonians earnestly begged for the *favor*—literally, for the *grace*—of participation in the support of the saints. In verses 6, 7, and 19, the collection for the saints in Jerusalem is referred to as “this gracious work,” which is really an attempt to smooth out the original. Literally, Paul calls the collection, “this grace.” In chapter 9 verse 8: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.”

But amongst all this talk about grace, two verses stand out with particular distinction in grounding Paul’s appeal to sacrificial giving in the **grace of God**. One in each chapter. The first is chapter 8 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 through His poverty might become rich.” And the second is the final verse of the section, chapter 9 verse 15: “Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!” The pinnacle of God’s grace, which stands as the **motivating source** of faithful Christian giving, is the indescribable gift of the **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ, who renounced the riches of heavenly glory and embraced the poverty of life and death as a human being, precisely so that we who were destitute of God’s favor and blessing could be enriched with the very righteousness of God Himself, and could lay hold of the treasure that is knowing and loving and serving Jesus! “Dear Corinthians, if I am going to have *any* hope of enlisting your support in the ministry of this collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem, I *must* make known to you the *grace* of God!”

You see, Paul sees a direct connection between (a) the incarnation and cross of the Lord Jesus Christ and (b) the hearts and the purse strings of the Corinthians. He sees the **grace of God** in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ—not merely as that which *introduces* us into the Christian life—but as the very **source of motivation** and power by which we are sustained and strengthened to *live* the Christian life each and every day! One preacher put it this way. He said, “The life of a true Christian receives its major motivation and its dominant contours of practice from the central truths of the Gospel” (Martin). This means, friends, that the Gospel is not just a story you believe to get you out of hell! It means that if we’re going to claim that we have a share in the promises of the Gospel, the very truths of the Gospel must be brought to bear on our lives! And

those truths must actively shape, moment by moment, the ways that we think, feel, speak, and act about absolutely everything!

Here is the most practical, the most mundane of administrative matters in the church: collecting an offering to meet the practical needs of fellow Christians. And Paul does not attempt to accomplish this task by insisting upon their duty, by issuing apostolic decrees, or by outlining five easy steps to having successful offerings! Still less does he engage in any fleshly methods of extortion, or of emotional or psychological manipulation! No, he reminds people of the *Gospel* by which they themselves were saved! He reminds them of the *grace* that God has already generously given to them apart from any doing of their own! And then, on the basis of those indicatives—those divinely accomplished realities—he calls them to live consistently with the grace they’ve been shown! How is one who is a beneficiary of the lavish generosity of God through His grace in the Gospel of Christ—how is such a one to think about giving to others?

There is a direct line—an umbilical cord of spiritual life and perspective—between (a) the central truths of Gospel grace and (b) the hearts and the behavior of those who are beneficiaries of that grace (cf. Martin). And so Paul says, “I make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia.” Because if grace can’t open our wallets, God doesn’t want what comes out of them! If the personal, experimental acquaintance with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is insufficient **motivation** to open your heart and give generously in the way that you have been given to, God says, “Keep your money. I don’t want it.”

It is **the grace of God** at work in the hearts of His people that was the **motivating source** of the generosity of the churches of Macedonia. It wasn’t guilt, it wasn’t clever manipulation tactics on the part of the Apostle Paul, it wasn’t even human kindness or philanthropy on the part of the Macedonians. It was the supernatural, sanctifying grace of God at work in their hearts, empowering them to look beyond their own personal comforts, needs, and limitations, to look up to the cross from which they had received such magnanimous grace, and then to look out to the needs of their brothers and sisters, and to meet those needs by sacrificial giving. The example Paul calls our attention to is not the *virtue* of the Macedonians, but the **grace of God** *given* to the Macedonians, as the **motivating source** of Christian giving.

And GraceLife, you need to ask yourselves: “Is this divine grace at work in your own hearts? Is the grace of God that pulsed through the veins of the Macedonians—the grace that, by the glory of the cross of Christ, opens the heart to delight to imitate the divine generosity that it has been shown, and creates radical generosity—is that grace pulsing through your own spiritual veins? Who doesn’t want more of the grace of God at work in their lives? Which one of you would refuse God’s sanctifying grace? I think each one of us who belongs to Christ and who is in a proper frame of heart would welcome more grace by which we might more faithfully set our affections on things above, and work out our salvation with fear and trembling! And so we must

pursue the large-heartedness and generosity of spirit that makes us eager to meet the financial needs of our brothers and sisters.

And I am after that in you, not because I want your money! As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:14, “I do not seek what is yours, but you!” As he says in Philippians 4:17, “Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account!” I long for you to be a generous people, not so the church can have nicer facilities or the pastors can drive nicer cars! But because if you’re a generous people, it will mean that **the grace of God** will have been at work in your hearts! I’m not after material profit; I’m after the *spiritual* profit that *you* will reap if you press hard after the grace of generosity! I want to see divine blessing be multiplied in your lives! As you give cheerfully, chapter 9 verses 7 and 8 say that “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed.” That’s what I want for you! Abounding grace for an abundant harvest of righteousness!

Dear friends, it is the **grace of God** that is the **source** of all genuine Christian giving. Can you be **motivated** by the **grace** that you have been shown in Christ to be a lavishly generous people? To excel still more in this grace of Christian giving?

II. The Challenging Circumstances (v. 2a)

Well, in the second place, let us observe not only the motivating source of Christian giving, but also: **the challenging circumstances** of the Macedonians’ giving. Number two: **the challenging circumstances**. And we see this in verse 2, where Paul specifies *how* the grace of God was manifested in the lives of Macedonian Christians. “Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that *in a great ordeal of affliction* their *abundance of joy* and their *deep poverty* overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.” And of course the **principle** that we learn from this is that genuine Christian generosity is unhindered by the challenging circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Paul speaks of the churches of Macedonia—which, of course, are those churches Paul founded in the 16th and 17th chapters of the Book of Acts: the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. And he says here that all three churches were, at the time of their giving to the saints in Jerusalem, experiencing “a great ordeal of affliction,” or, as the ESV has it, “a severe test of affliction.” This word for “affliction” is the familiar word *thlipsis* that we’ve seen six times already in 2 Corinthians, as Paul describes the many difficulties he faces in the course of his ministry of the Gospel as afflictions. The word literally means to be pressed or be crushed; it refers to feeling the pressure of a hostile world that does not take kindly to having its worldview and values challenged by a life of faithful obedience to the Lord Jesus. Christ Himself uses this word when He promises in John 16:33 that in this world His disciples will have tribulation—

literally, “affliction.” And in Acts 11:19 it’s used to describe the persecution of the church that had arisen after the stoning of Stephen.

And that’s really the sense of the word here. This great ordeal or severe test of affliction is rightly identified with the persecution that the Christians in these cities faced for their commitment to Christ and His Gospel. The Philippians had been acquainted with affliction for Christ’s sake. In Philippians 1:29–30 Paul writes to that church, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to *suffer* for His sake, *experiencing the same conflict* which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.” The Thessalonians were no strangers to persecution as well. In 2 Thessalonians 1:4, Paul says, “Therefore we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance and faith in the midst of all your *persecutions and afflictions* which you endure.” And though we have no canonical letter from Paul to the Bereans, we do have Luke’s account of the persecution they endured even during Paul’s founding visit. Acts 17:13 records that the Jews came from Thessalonica to Berea to stir up the crowds against Paul and the Christians there. And so Paul makes the point that these Macedonian churches found themselves once again in the midst of a severe ordeal of afflicting persecution.

But not only that. Verse 2 speaks not only of their severe affliction but also of their *deep poverty*. Now it would have been one thing to speak of their affliction and their poverty. But Paul here speaks of their *deep* poverty. And the word for “deep” is the word *bathos*. It’s the same word used to speak of the depths of the ocean when it’s referred to as “the deep.” In Luke 5:4, Jesus told Peter to “Put out into the *deep* water and let down your nets for a catch.” In fact, in the early 20th century, the English language borrowed this word *bathos* when it named the *bathysphere*, which was a submersible spherical chamber that was used to probe the depths of the ocean. And the commentators all understand the intent that this word carries. They characterize this “deep poverty” as “the very depths of destitution” (Barclay), “extreme, abysmal poverty” (Guthrie, 395), “down-to-the-depth, poverty at its deepest, rock-bottom poverty” (Barrett, 216). You’re getting the picture. The Macedonians were not on easy street! Their persecutions and afflictions had obviously had a financial impact as well.

Now, in **challenging circumstances** such as these—severe afflictions and persecutions, and extreme destitution and rock-bottom poverty—you would expect that the Macedonians might have a legitimate excuse to let the plate pass. Given how Paul describes their circumstances, it’s hard to imagine that they were in much better of a financial situation than the very saints in Jerusalem whom the offering was designed to relieve! They were already scraping the bottom of the barrel! But they didn’t let this stop them. Look at the text again: “in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty *overflowed* in the wealth of their liberality”!

Now what this teaches us is that severe affliction and deep poverty do not need to be barriers to Christian generosity. I think for many of us, we expect that the proper circumstances for our own generous giving are circumstances of comfort and security. When we're presented with a need to which we might contribute, we survey our resources and ask ourselves, "Well, is this the right time? Do we have enough to spare?" and such questions. If we're experiencing times that might be described as severe affliction and deep poverty, we feel entitled to be given *to*. But because of the grace of God that had worked in the Macedonians, their suffering was the occasion for them to *give*, not to *get*! And so Pastor John comments that "Devout believers live above their circumstances." In other words, those faithful believers in whom the grace of God is at work don't allow their **challenging circumstances** to hinder their generosity.

You say, "How is that possible?" Look at the text again: "In a great ordeal of affliction their *abundance of joy* and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality." It was their ability to maintain their joy—indeed, their *abundance* of joy—in the midst of their severe afflictions that caused them to *overflow* in generosity. Christian joy is not contingent upon circumstances! Christian joy is not choked out by affliction! Paul himself comments in 2 Corinthians 7:4, he says, "I am overflowing with joy in all our affliction!" He said of the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 1:6 that they had "received the word in much affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit"!

And so Christian joy is not circumscribed by pleasant circumstances. And that is because Christian joy is rooted in that which circumstances cannot touch: namely, the magnification of the glory of Jesus! Paul says in Philippians 1:18–21—while in a Roman prison, awaiting the verdict of his potential execution—that he will go on rejoicing, because Christ will be *magnified* in his body, whether he lives or whether he dies. "I'll be overflowing with joy even amidst my affliction, so long as Jesus Christ is exalted, and magnified, and glorified!" And when the Macedonians realized that there was more of the glory of Jesus to enjoy on the path of generous, sacrificial giving, their joy in *Him* severed the root of joy in money, or joy in pleasant circumstances, and they experienced the freedom of radical generosity. What a formula! Severe affliction, plus deep poverty, plus *abounding joy*, equals abounding generosity!

But of course, there's one element missing from that equation! What is it? Where did their abundance of joy come from? Answer: it came from the grace of God at work in their hearts! One commentator hit the nail on the head. He wrote, "Grace had drawn them to the well of eternal life and had given them to drink of the ever-refreshing, soul-satisfying water that is Jesus Christ. . . . God had imparted a taste for the sweetness of the Son of God! The alluring aroma of money and safety was replaced by the superior fragrance of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord! . . . They were able to take this approach because grace was operative in their hearts. Whatever financial lack their giving might have induced would be more than compensated by an abundance of grace and spiritual joy" (Storms, 47, 51).

Dear friends, when you hear that, doesn't that picture of selfless freedom entice you to want to give generously? Doesn't that make you jealous to have that kind of communion with Jesus? To be so satisfied by the beauty of His glory that you experience the kind of abounding joy that enables you to live above your circumstances? I want that kind of grace at work in my life! I want to see the inestimable worth of Christ that from joy over finding this treasure, I can release my grip on all my earthly possessions in service of the Gospel, so I can lay hold of *Him*, and call my loss *gain* (Matt 13:44; cf. Phil 3:8)! And dear people, I want the same for you! When you're presented with the opportunity to meet a need in the church, but you look at your own life and you find severe afflictions and perhaps even deep poverty, I pray that you will have so cultivated the grace of God in your heart that such grace produces an abounding joy that overflows into radical generosity! That your giving will rise above your **circumstances** because of the treasure chest of holy joy that is to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ!

III. The Driving Disposition (v. 2b)

Well, that brings us to our **third observation** concerning the Macedonians' giving that informs our understanding of Christian generosity. We've seen the motivating source and the challenging circumstances. But here we come to, number three, **the driving disposition**. Look once more at verse 2: “. . . in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty *overflowed* in the *wealth* of their *liberality*.”

And don't miss the wordplay that Paul engages in here. The NASB translates different forms of the same word as two different words: their abundance of joy overflowed. But both “abundance” and “overflowed” come from the same root word. So it might be more accurately translated, “. . . their overflow of joy overflowed,” or “their abundance of joy abounded.” But then notice that it wasn't just the abundance of their *joy* that abounded; it was their abundance of joy *and* their deep *poverty* that *abounded* unto the *wealth* of their liberality. In concert with joy, poverty abounded into wealth!

Now, what is this wealth that their poverty abounded into? Well, we know that their poverty didn't abound into material wealth. That is not what Paul says grace does to people. No matter what Joel Osteen or Creflo Dollar or the other charlatans on TBN tell you, grace does not miraculously transform poor people into upper-middle class people, who then may give out of the abundance of their replenished bank accounts! No! What their joy-filled poverty abounded into was not material wealth, but a wealth of liberality, or a wealth of generosity! Grace did not multiply their shekels; grace created a **driving disposition** of the heart to give generously in spite of their circumstances—a **disposition** of generosity that can only be described as *spiritual* wealth, what Jesus calls in Luke 12:21 being “rich toward God.”

And this word translated “liberality” or “generosity” is the Greek word *haplotēs*, which is found only in Paul’s writings in the New Testament. In a number of contexts it refers to sincerity or simplicity—simplicity in the sense of the opposite of duplicity. This is how he characterizes his own personal integrity in chapter 1 verse 12: “. . . that in *simplicity* and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.” In chapter 11 verse 13, he uses this word to describe the pure and single-hearted devotion to Christ that is the substance of true worship. He tells the Corinthians, “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the *simplicity* and purity of devotion to Christ.” This speaks of integrity, of having no duplicity of motives, but being entirely open, up front, and unreserved, conducting oneself in genuineness, laying all your cards on the table.

And then three times here in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, along with one other time in Romans 12:8, he uses this term in the context of giving, and it is translated “liberality” or “generosity.” And so this puts the emphasis on a true, open-hearted, genuine disposition to benefit their fellow-believers with whatever it is they had to give them. It refers to generosity without duplicity, without double motives. They didn’t give with some paganized superstition, thinking in their hearts, “Well, if in the midst of my deep poverty I give a dime to the collection, surely God will take notice and sooner or later will repay me with a dollar!” So that the whole time their motive in giving is finally to *get!* They didn’t give with a disposition that complained of their own lack of resources, questioning God’s goodness to them and envying the blessings of others: “What? You mean here I am in the midst of severe affliction and rock-bottom, bottom-of-the-barrel poverty, and God expects me to give what little I have to the saints in Jerusalem! I’m as poor as they are!” No! They gave with integrity, with simplicity of heart, with genuine, open-hearted generosity to see their brethren’s needs met and burdens relieved—even if it meant imposing significant financial burdens upon themselves!

And so one commentator says, commenting on “the wealth of their generosity,” that this wealth denotes “not the actual size of their contribution to the collection, but the open-hearted and open-handed attitude they showed in their giving” (Harris, 563). Another observed that “monetary help from the Macedonian churches flowed not from a reservoir of monetary wealth, but from joy-filled, integrity-infused poverty” (Guthrie, 396).

And this means, friends, that this **driving disposition** of biblical generosity is not measured by what comes through your *hands!* It’s measured by what you have in your *heart!* Generosity isn’t about the amount of money you can give! It’s about the **driving disposition** of a heart that, by the supernatural grace of God, overflows with an abundance of joy in Jesus, no matter the challenging circumstances! It is a **disposition** of the heart that, in spite of the pressure of crushing affliction and debilitating poverty, delights to find a way to open your heart and open your life to meet the needs of the people of God! Generosity, dear people, is not merely the

prerogative of the rich. What we learn from this text is that the most genuine generosity is often displayed by those who have the least to give (Hughes, 288). Genuine, biblical generosity has nothing to do with what you own! It has to do with who owns you. It has nothing to do with what's in your *hands*, but rather with the **driving disposition** that divine grace works in your *heart*.

Conclusion

And dear friends, the same grace of God that was at work in the churches of Macedonia, is available to be at work here in Grace Community Church in Los Angeles! Is it at work in you? Dear people, has this **driving disposition** of open-hearted generosity made a home in your own heart? Is there evidence of the grace of God at work within you, producing an abundance of joy in Christ that severs the root of joy in money, and possessions, and comfort, and earthly pleasures, so that you're freed from the bondage of your own stuff and liberated into the freedom of self-forgetful, open-hearted generosity—*despite* the difficulty of your circumstances?

If not, friend, it may be because you have fallen into neglect in those duties by which the grace of God is cultivated in your life. God works this supernatural grace in the hearts of His people by the *means* of Grace—by communion with Him through the reading of Scripture, through earnest prayer and meditation, through consistent and genuine fellowship with fellow-believers. Perhaps you've neglected those means of grace and so have cut yourself off from the flow of God's strengthening blessing in your life. You need to repent of that. You need to amend your ways, and to discipline yourself to pursue those avenues by which God communicates His grace to you.

But the absence of that grace in your heart may also be because you're a stranger to God's grace all together. You could never meet this standard of open-hearted generosity, because you have not yet become a beneficiary of the lavish grace of God that is offered to you in Christ's Gospel. You're an unbeliever. Whatever you may say about yourself, your heart is a total stranger to these operations of God's grace that enable a person to live in the freedom of self-forgetful service of others. You remain dead in your sins.

If that's you: dear friend, I make known to you 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. Confess the guilt of your sin. Acknowledge that your sins merit for you the punishment of eternal separation from God in hell. And look to the One who submitted Himself to the poverty—not only of life in a sinful world, but of death by the hands of sinful men—all to pay the debt of sin that you owed, and to bring you into the riches of forgiveness and eternal fellowship with the God you were created to know. Turn from your sin and trust Christ alone for righteousness. Partake of the riches of God's grace through faith alone in Jesus, this morning.