

“Generosity from Grace-Enlarged Hearts”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

July 18, 2021

One of the things our family has been enjoying recently is teriyaki pork chops on the grill. My wife found a teriyaki marinade recipe that we really like. We let the pork chops marinate in this tasty sauce and then I put down some foil on the grill so that I can grill the pork chops right in the marinade and the result is tender, flavor-infused pork chops.

Well, today we are going to discover that generosity is the response (the flavor) of a heart that has been marinated in God’s grace.

Back in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul had begun a collection among the churches to provide relief for the persecution-induced poverty of the Jerusalem church. The Corinthians had led the way in setting aside funds that inspired other churches to do that same. However, the rift caused between Corinth and Paul by the false teachers had interrupted this relief ministry. But now that the Corinthian church was being reconciled to Paul, he encourages this Gentile church to resume their support of their Jewish brothers in Jerusalem.

Scripture Reading: *2Corinthians 8:1-15*

When God’s grace is actively working in a believer’s heart, it produces generosity. A great example of this is Zacchaeus, the little tax collector who made his fortune by severely overcharging people. When Zacchaeus met Jesus and experienced the gratitude and joy of forgiveness, he vowed to give half of his goods to the poor and to pay back anyone he had defrauded four-fold (Lk 19:8)! In a moment, Zacchaeus was transformed from a greedy, cheating, hoarder, to a man of generosity. Why? Because the generosity of God’s grace had changed his attitude toward God, people, and possessions.

A heart filled with God’s grace is like a water balloon. The more you put in it, the greater capacity it has. God’s grace stretches and enlarges our hearts. It

expands our ability to be joyfully generous. Grace empowers us to respond to people and needs as God’s hands—as though grace owns us!

Here’s the big picture: ***The grace of God produces joyful, large-hearted, and voluntary generosity that flourishes in any circumstance, including poverty and abundance, as we give ourselves supremely to God.***

2 Cor 8 points us to 4 advantages of grace-empowered generosity:

1. **Grace empowers joyful generosity that flourishes even in lean circumstances** (2Cor 8:1-5).

Paul uses the example of the Macedonian believers to illustrate that the amount of one’s resources are not the primary factor when it comes to generosity and joyful giving. The controlling factor is God’s grace.

The language in vs. 1-5 is really significant so let’s dive in. Vs. 1: “We wish to make known to you the *grace of God* which has been *given* in the churches of Macedonia...” So what is the thrust, the focal point, of what Paul is drawing their attention to? The Grace of God. In fact, Paul will use the word grace (with multiple nuances) 10 times in 2 Cor 8-9. Paul’s point of reference is not money, but God’s grace.

Now, what was the context in which this grace came to the Macedonians? Vs. 2: “*In a great ordeal of affliction...*” The churches of Macedonia had been experiencing severe poverty which was intensified by persecution.¹ So what affect did the grace of God have on this poverty-stricken, persecuted people? Did it ease their poverty or end the persecution? No. The grace of God infused this poor, persecuted people with abundant, overflowing joy! The joy of grace. The joy of God. The joy of hope invincible. Beloved, joy that comes from God is not a mere color, flavor, or scent. Joy is a power! A power to live above the dominion of circumstances! Joy is the glad-hearted gratitude and the optimistic hope that pervades our lives and circumstances because God’s grace has purchased us for heaven and sustains us in the

¹ 2Cor 8:2; Acts 16:20; 17:50; Phil 1:29-30; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 3:3-4

present. This is why we must fight for joy. And the way we fight for joy is not only walking by faith but also marinating ourselves in the grace of God.

What affect did this God-given, grace-empowered joy have on the poor, persecuted Macedonians? Vs. 2: “Their *abundance of joy* and *deep poverty overflowed* in the *wealth of their liberality* (abundance of their generosity). What Paul is emphasizing here is not the amount that they gave but the spirit with which they gave it. Not the quantity of their gift but the quality of life from which it came.

When we do the math of grace in verse 2, it looks like this:

The Math of Grace: Affliction + Joy in God + poverty = wealth (free to be generous). Life Principle: True wealth is determined by the *quality* of our life in relationship to God, not the *quantity* of our possessions.

What did the generosity of the Macedonians look like? Vs. 3: “For I testify that they gave *according to their ability*, and *beyond their ability* they gave *of their own accord*.” In other words, they willingly/voluntarily gave what they could and then gave sacrificially out of their necessities. It’s possible that the Macedonians ate less meals so that the Jerusalem saints could eat more. And notice the passion with which they did it. Vs. 4: “begging us with much urging for the favor (grace) of participation in the support of the saints.” ‘Paul, please, please let us do all that we can to offer relief to our suffering brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.’

In vs. 5 we see that the Macedonians are giving, not because Paul had asked or expected them to give from their impoverished state. In fact, Paul’s relief ministry and even the need itself are secondary. “They gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us” (ESV). Their generosity was first to God. Their generosity was an act of gratitude, faith, and worship to God. By giving to the suffering saints in Jerusalem, they were giving to the Lord, trusting God for their own daily bread.

Grace empowers joyful generosity that flourishes even in lean circumstances. It’s possible to have little and yet have a joyful spirit of generosity because generosity is not determined by the amount of

resources you possess but by the grace you possess. A lack of resources does not require diminished joy.

Many years ago we had an elderly sister who has since gone to be with the Lord. She and her husband lived in the most ‘frugal’ part of town and seemed to always live on the bare minimum. In fact, it was not uncommon for God to provide for them through the benevolent funds of the church. Yet I can remember going to visit her and with joyful exuberance she would give me 2 cans of vegetables to contribute to the food drive for the food shelf or she would rummage through their limited possessions to find something to contribute to the church garage sale. That’s the kind of large-heartedness that God’s grace produces in his people. Its not held captive by limited resources.

2. **Grace empowers us to excel in generosity as an expression of love** (2Cor 8:6-8).

[6-8] When Paul mentions the Corinthian’s abundance of faith, speech, and knowledge in vs. 7, he’s probably referring to their spiritual gifts which had been generously imparted to them by God’s grace. Earlier in 1Cor 1:7 Paul had noted that the Corinthians were “not lacking any spiritual gift.” And remember that spiritual gifts are *grace* gifts—evidence of God’s grace actively at work.

Paul calls them to demonstrate the same abundance of generosity in their giving as they have experienced in the abundance of spiritual gifts that God has given them. The NIV captures it this way: “*see that you also excel in this grace of giving*.” There is an interesting use of words in the Greek that may not be obvious in your English translation. Three times in vs. 2 and 7 Paul uses the word ‘abundance’ or ‘overflow.’ Here’s the idea: just as the Macedonians *overflow* with joy in their *overflowing* poverty (2), so you should *overflow* in your generosity (7).

Beloved, our goal is to excel in the grace of giving! To do everything we can to support the work of God’s kingdom and to do whatever we can to meet essential needs around us. Why? Because it is an expression of sincere love (vs. 8: proving...the sincerity of your love).

The collection that Paul is taking up for the suffering believers in Jerusalem is about more than just meeting physical needs. It is an expression of love and unity in the church. Remember that the church in Corinth was made up of Gentile believers while the Jerusalem church was mostly Jewish believers. This expression of practical love was a means of narrowing the natural gap between these differing people groups so that they could solidify the union that they share in Christ.

True generosity is the inflow of God's grace that practically results in the outflow of God's love. Church we can excel in the grace of giving. We can be the most generous-hearted, joyful givers on the face of the earth because we are the recipients of God's grace. Yet the ultimate goal is not to be considered generous, but to honor God by being a conduit through which His grace and love can flow without hindrance.

3. Grace-empowered generosity enables us to live out the gospel by imitating the divine generosity of Jesus (2Cor 8:9).

[9] Notice again, that the focal point is grace—"the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." And that grace is the template for the Christian life. The very template that the Macedonian believers had joyfully adopted in their sacrificial giving as a response to God's grace.

How was Jesus rich? In one sense in his heavenly state, Jesus was never in want, never had a lack. Yet true wealth is not about material resources but about the quality of life in relationship to God (cf. 5:15). Jesus enjoyed the richness of His Father's favor. The quality of His life with the Father and the Spirit was perfect, infinite, and undiminished. But when Jesus became a man, He not only experienced want for food and rest, He took on the poverty of death, experiencing the Father's displeasure for our sin. And He did this not so that we could become rich in material, temporal possessions, but so that we could gain the richness of God's favor in true life, now and eternally. If Christ expended Himself for our benefit, then following Christ means that we too can expend what we have for the benefit of others.

Yet we not only receive *spiritual* riches from Christ. We also receive the Father's benevolent care for us and the assurance that He will meet our *earthly* needs as we live for Him and His eternal purposes (Mt. 6:33). The practical reality is that we have everything we need in God. And *because He is our provider, we can afford to generously give* of our resources as an act of faith in His unlimited grace.

By the way, when Paul says in vs. 8, "I am not speaking this as a command," and in vs 10 says, "I give my opinion on this matter," he's not saying that his word does not carry apostolic weight. He's probably saying that He does not have a direct command from Jesus on this matter but is simply applying the implications of the gospel to the situation. The weight of authority comes not so much from Jesus' words but from His example.

As Paul is about to make clear in vs. 13, we are not commanded to take a vow of poverty so that others can live in luxury. Yet as we see in the Macedonians, the grace of God is sufficient enough for us to give as sacrificially as want with joy for the spiritual and physical needs of others. For the Christian, *giving is about gospel living*.

4. Grace-empowered giving according to our ability (God's provision) is a means by which God provides for those in need (2Cor 8:10-15).

In other words, God may have provided surplus for you so that you can be the hands through which His grace provides for a particular need. [10-15]

Paul begins in vs 10 by calling the Corinthians to now follow through on their initial desire to help the Jerusalem saints. It is to their own advantage/benefit to follow through and finish what they have begun. Remember, generous joyful giving is fueled by God's grace. And when God's grace flows through our lives to others, it also benefits us because our lives are also enriched by the working of God's grace. When we extend a ministry of grace to someone, the grace doesn't just leave us to go to them. Rather it is multiplied from us to them. It's like putting lotion on someone else's hands. We not only rub the lotion into their hands, but into ours as well. We benefit from ministering grace to others because our lives are enriched by God's gracious work in and through us.

Now notice that Paul is careful to clarify what he is and *isn't* asking the Corinthians to do. He's asking them to give *according to their ability*, not beyond it (11). This is important because he just gave the example of the Macedonians who gave *beyond* their ability as well as the example of Jesus who gave everything.

Do you see how that could be misinterpreted as a call to poverty or misunderstood as a guilt-motivation? That's not what Paul is after. He's not trying to use the Macedonians to manipulate the Corinthians to give more. So, Paul clarifies in vs. 12 that if they are willing to give, "it is acceptable to give according to what they have." Paul is not asking them to sacrifice their basic essentials. Paul is not asking them to go into debt. In a sense, Paul is recognizing the providence of God by not asking the Corinthians to give beyond what God has provided for them. He's saying in essence, "give in proportion to what God has provided for you."

Then in vs. 13-15 he gives the principle of equality or fairness—the idea is one of balance. **[13-15]** What Paul is *not* implementing here is some form of socialism nor is he trying to level the economic status among the churches. What he *is* doing is addressing the imbalance of some believers going hungry (to no fault of their own) while other believers hold a surplus. He's striving for a balance or an equality in which everyone's essential needs are being met so that one is not starving while others are stockpiling.

This becomes even more clear when Paul quotes Exodus 16:18 where the Israelites were gathering manna in the wilderness. Some gathered more and some gathered less but God superintended the process in such a way that no one had too little and no one had too much. In the wilderness God made sure everyone had their fair share. But now that God's people are inhabited with the Spirit of grace in the new covenant, we are entrusted with the voluntarily care of the needs of the poor.

By the way, do you remember what happened when the Israelites started to stockpile the manna instead of following God's instructions for daily provision? It became foul and bred worms (Ex 16:20). That's not to say that we should not save for 'rainy days.' In fact, Proverbs declares it's wise to save. But if we hoard while our brother starves, our stockpile may be foul to God.

So what should be our main take-aways from 2 Cor 8? Let's ask ourselves:

- How does God's grace impact your view of money and possessions? How does it impact your view of needs and kingdom ministry?
- Is your giving characterized by joy, generosity, and a spirit of willingness? Is your giving an act of grateful worship?
- Do you believe that you are free to be generous based on God's promise of provision?
- Is your giving proportionate to God's provision? Are you giving according to your ability?

In the OT the minimum standard was the tithe (10%). But in the NT no such command is given (nor is it condemned). Why do you think the NT is silent on the tithe? Because under the new covenant, we are compelled not by mere law but by the Holy Spirit of grace. My hunch is that the NT's silence on tithing is not to excuse us from disciplined giving, but to remove any potential restraint from joyful generosity.

I'm not opposed to tithing. In fact, I use the principle in my own life as a starting point. Randy Alcorn suggests that for NT believers tithing is like training wheels. It gets you started. But how fun would it be to ride a bike if you never graduated from training wheels. The spirit of 2 Cor 8 & 9 is, *throw off the training wheels and ride the ride of joyful generosity!*

Our goal is not to reach a certain dollar amount (or even percentage) in our giving. Our goal is to live out the free spirit of large-hearted, joyful, generosity that is shaped by drinking in the fullness of God's grace.

Our present-day ministry needs may be different than those in Paul's day—they will vary from season to season—but the truths of 2 Cor 8 are just as relevant to our hearts today. ***God's grace calls us to large-hearted, joyful generosity.***

One of the things that excites me the most about our building project is not the building itself or even the ministry we can expand in it, but the

opportunity for us to grow our faith, be stretched in our generosity, and experience the joy of God's multiplied grace in our lives as we rejoice in the abundance of His provision. So let's pray, let's trust, let's give. Let's be overjoyed!