

“Generosity from Grace-Enlarged Hearts”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

May 17, 2026

Before we dive into 2 Cor 8, I want to take a moment to comment on the last 3 verses of Philippians--Paul's personal words of greeting. I'm doing this to make a loose connection between Philippians and 2 Cor 8.

I hope that you have found our recent study of Philippians to be encouraging. I hope that you are developing new habits and patterns of rejoicing in the Lord. I hope that you are more intentionally anchoring your joy to the unchangeable character of Jesus rather than tethering your joy to unstable circumstances. I hope that you have a renewed vision for treasuring Jesus such that you could say, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (1:21). And I hope that you have a more acute focus on how Christ-centered living (in a manner worthy of the gospel—1:27) makes us more oriented on serving others out of the mind of Christ rather than merely living out of self-interest (2:1-11).

In light of these rich themes in Philippians, it might be tempting to overlook the final 3 verses of the book as mere greetings. Yet, underlying these greetings is an essential bond of unity and love that believers around the world share with one another—a bond of unity that has practical implications as we will see today in 2Cor 8.

Here are Paul's concluding words:

“Greet *every saint* in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. *All the saints* greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Phil 4:21-23).

Let me just mention 3 simple observations. First, Paul doesn't merely send a letter of instruction. He also sends personal greetings because the bond believers have in Christ is one of giving and receiving love—and as we will see today, that includes meeting the needs of those who are suffering.

Notice that no one is left out. “Every saint” and “all the saints” have an active part in loving and caring for their brothers and sisters worldwide. Second, the greeting from those of Caesar's household is evidence that the power of the gospel had infiltrated the very heart of the Roman empire. Many from the imperial guard and others who serve in close proximity to the emperor had become believers through Paul's imprisonment—praise God that He works through adversity. Finally, Paul's heart in ministering to the Philippians is that they will walk in the grace of the Lord Jesus (cf. 1:2).

Now today, I want to give you further opportunity to see how the grace of God impacted the Philippian church. So we are going to take a little detour from Philippians to 2Cor 8 & 9 for the next couple Sundays. Here's why: As I was reflecting on Paul's thanksgiving for the Philippians' sacrificial gift to meet his needs in chapter 4, I couldn't help but think of 2Cor 8 which is another example of impressive, sacrificial giving on behalf of the Philippians. The Philippians are one of the Macedonian churches that Paul lifts up by way of example for the Corinthians. They had come to the aid of persecuted saints in Jerusalem through joyful and sacrificial generosity. And Paul is urging the Corinthians to join them.

By way of background, in 1 Cor 16, Paul had begun a collection among the churches to provide relief for the impoverished and persecuted believers in Jerusalem. The Corinthians had led the way in setting aside funds, inspiring other churches to do that same. However, false teachers had caused a rift between the Corinthians and Paul, interrupting the relief efforts. 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.

What we are about to see is that **Grace given out of grace received is an experience of radical joy for the believer.** When God's grace is actively working in a believer's heart, it produces joyful generosity. A great example of this is Zacchaeus, the little tax collector who had 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 as though grace owns us!

Here's the big picture: ***The grace of God produces joyful, large-hearted, generosity that flourishes in times of leanness and abundance, as we give ourselves first to the Lord and then in service to others.***

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).

[vs. 1-5] Paul uses the example of the Macedonian believers to illustrate that when it comes to generosity and joyful giving, the controlling factor is not the abundance of one's resources. The controlling factor is God's grace.

The language in vs. 1-5 is really significant so let's dive in. Vs. 1: "We want you to know, brothers, about the *grace of God* that has been given among the churches of Macedonia..." Notice what Paul is drawing our 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 focal point is not money, but God's grace.

Now, what was the context in which this grace came to the Macedonians? Vs. 2: "*In a severe test 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 invincible hope! Beloved, joy that comes from God is not a mere emotion. Joy is a power—the grace-empowered ability 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 present.** The way we fight for joy is not only walking by faith but also marinating our hearts 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 their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity* (an abundance of 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 (freedom to be generous).

When we step back, we can see a broader life principle behind vs. 2.

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 beyond that they gave sacrificially out of their necessities. Most likely, the Macedonians ate less so that the Jerusalem saints could eat more. And notice the passion with which they did it. Vs. 4: "begging us earnestly for the favor (grace) of taking part in the relief of the

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

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. Rather, they gave as unto the Lord according to vs. 5: "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.

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've received. *Limited resources do 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 on the bare minimum. In fact, it was not uncommon for God to provide basic necessities 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 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.

Generosity is not held captive by limited resources when it is empowered by God's grace. *Grace empowers joyful generosity that flourishes even when resources are limited.*

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. Four times in vs. 2 and vs. 7 Paul uses the same word which we translate as *abundance, overflow, or excel*. Here's the idea: just as the Macedonians *overflow* with joy in their *overflowing* poverty (2), so the Corinthians, who *overflow/abound* in spiritual gifts, should also *overflow* in generosity (7). In other words, if the Macedonians' generosity abounds in poverty, how much more should your generosity abound in plenty.

Beloved, our goal is to abound in generosity—to excel in the grace of giving! We should do everything we can to support kingdom work and the needs of God's people. Why? Because it is an expression of sincere love (vs. 8: "to prove...your love is...genuine").

Don't miss this. 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 cultural gap between these differing people groups so that they could solidify the union that they share in Christ.

True generosity results from the inflow of God's grace into our hearts which produces the overflow of God's love through our hands. 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 infinite grace.

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

“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” (2Cor 8:9).

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 of grace that the Macedonian believers had joyfully adopted in their sacrificial giving.

How was Jesus rich? In one sense in his heavenly state, Jesus was never in want, never had a lack. Yet, as we discovered true wealth is not just 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 also 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 ourselves (and what we have) for the needs 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 kingdom (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 say this not as a command,” and in vs. 10, “I give my opinion on this matter,” he’s *not* saying that his word does not carry apostolic authority. He’s probably saying that He does not have a direct word from Jesus on this matter but is simply applying the clear

implications of the gospel. He’s giving the instruction based on the obvious implications of Jesus’ example.

As Paul is about to make clear in vs. 13, vs. 9 is not a command to take a vow of poverty so that others can live in luxury. Yet as we observe from the Macedonians, the grace of God is sufficient 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—imitating the generosity of Jesus and His grace.*

4. **Grace-empowered giving according to our ability (God’s provision) is a means by which God provides for the needs of others** (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 the needs of others (or the work of ministry). **[10-12]**

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 (cf. Phil 4:17). 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 *is not* 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 beyond their ability. 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. 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 in which everyone's essential needs are being met (by voluntary generosity) 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. God provided enough for everyone, as God's people shared their abundance with those in need.

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. Let me put it this way: *God may have given you more than you need, so that you can be the hands through which God provides for those who have less than they need.* Or in the words of Randy Alcorn, "God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving."²

So how should we personally apply 2 Cor 8? Let's ask ourselves:

- How does God's grace impact your attitude toward money and possessions? How does God's grace impact your view of others' 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 to provide for your needs (Matt 6:33; Phil 4:19)?
- Is your giving proportionate to God's provision for you? 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.

Personally, I'm not opposed to tithing. In fact, Pauline and I use the tithe principle as the starting point for our personal finances. 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 bicycle if you never graduated from training wheels? The spirit 2 Cor 8 & 9 is, *throwing off the training wheels to enjoy the ride of joyful generosity!*

Our goal is not to reach a certain dollar amount (or even percentage) in our giving. In fact, we would do ourselves a disservice by only making the application of 2Cor 8 to money. Our goal is to be a people of large-hearted, joyful, generosity in all of life as we rejoice in the abundance of God's grace.

² Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle*, pg. 73.

Is your heart marinating in God's grace such that it overflows with large-hearted love and kindness toward others?

Does your hope and trust in God give you joy in passing His grace on to others?