

## **THE GENEROSITY OF GIVING (1) EXPRESSING GENEROSITY**

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

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(With material inspired by *The Grace of Giving* by John Stott)

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Today we begin a three-part series exploring Paul's teaching on Christian giving as found in 2 Corinthians 8 & 9. In these chapters Paul is explaining arrangements for an offering from the Greek churches in Macedonia and Achaia to help the struggling churches in Judea. Paul also mentions this in 1 Corinthians 16 and in Romans 15. His teaching makes it clear that giving is not a mundane matter nor is it on the periphery of the Christian life. Indeed, the generosity of giving is at the core of what it means to be part of the Body of Christ in the world.

For Paul, generosity does not refer to the size of a gift but to the quality of the gift. He uses generosity as another word for grace. We are all beneficiaries of the generosity of God. Our giving expresses what we believe about God.

### **SCRIPTURE**

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; <sup>2</sup>for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup>For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, <sup>4</sup>begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— <sup>5</sup>and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, <sup>6</sup>so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you (2 Corinthians 8:1-6 NRSV).

### **1. COMMUNICATING GRACE**

The Macedonian Christians are exemplary givers. But Paul does not start with their giving. He starts with God's giving. The Macedonian Christians are recipients of the grace of God. They are beneficiaries of the generosity of God. Our gracious God is generous and is at work in our midst to help us become generous as well.

Not all giving is generous. Some give transactionally – thinking that if they give a donation then God owes them a favor. Some give with an agenda – making a donation with strings in order to manipulate the results. Some give because they want to be in the

spotlight and receive praise from others. But some give because their hearts have been flooded with the generous mercy of the One who made them.

The grace of God flows through three tributaries to produce the Macedonian river of generosity. On the one side is the severe affliction of persecution. On the other side is the crushing weight of poverty. But in the middle is this amazing joy that is not based on worldly circumstances. How easily our comfortable western culture deadens our sensitivity to the needs of others. Not so the Macedonian Christians who gave themselves to the Lord and the Lord's work. What a model for the Corinthian Christians to the south and for us today!

Next we read that Paul urges Titus to finish what he started in Corinth, the capital of Achaia. What had he started? Titus had encouraged the Corinthian Christians to give like the Macedonian Christians. They were to give in response to the generosity of God. They were to give in such a way as to communicate what they believed about the grace of God – that God is the first giver and the source of all giving.

Does your giving communicate the grace of God?

### **SCRIPTURE**

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking (2 Corinthians 8:7 NRSV).

### **2. SHOWING THE SPIRIT**

Paul makes reference to the gifts of the Spirit. The Corinthian Christians excelled in many such gifts. Spiritual gifts are special abilities the Spirit gives us to do God's work.

Paul argues, in effect, that if we have the Holy Spirit in our lives then not only will we be gifted for service we will also be prompted to be generous. The Holy Spirit is given to us so we can make visible the invisible grace of God. The world has difficulty seeing the truth, goodness and loveliness of God, but through us these qualities can become perceptible.

There are situations in life that can cause uncertainty. This is illustrated by a story that is a favorite for one of our members (I won't give you his name – but he does usher from time-to-time).

A funeral service was being held for a rather unsavory character who likely had never been near a place of worship his entire life. The service was being conducted by a minister who did not know the deceased and, misreading the emotional needs of the family, got

carried away and poured on praise for the departed.

After ten minutes of hearing the late lamented described as an ideal father, husband, and boss, the widow nudged her son and whispered, "Go up there and make sure it's Papa."

There are situations in life that can cause uncertainty for Christians, particularly when we talk about the Holy Spirit. But the Bible assures us that every Christian has the Holy Spirit and one of the best evidences that one has the Holy Spirit is a desire to give ourselves in service to others. Our generosity is one way to show the reality and power of the Spirit.

Does your giving show the Holy Spirit?

### **SCRIPTURE**

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. <sup>9</sup>For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:8-9 NRSV).

### **3. REVEALING THE CROSS**

Paul does not command the Corinthians to be generous. Instead, he puts them to the test by first comparing them to the Macedonia Christians who, in spite of adverse circumstances, gave beyond their ability and even pleaded for the privilege to do so. Secondly, he compares them to Christ and what he did for us on the Cross. How would we fare in such a test?

Notice the two references to poverty and the two references to wealth. Because of our poverty Christ renounced his riches so that through his poverty we might become rich. Paul is not talking about material poverty or wealth. The poverty of Christ is seen in his incarnation – especially his humiliation on the Cross. The wealth he gives us is salvation with all its rich benefits.

As we give, let us reflect on the Cross and all that was accomplished for us through the death of Christ. How meager is our worldly wealth by comparison.

Does your giving reveal the Cross of Christ?

### **CONCLUSION**

Generous giving suits us because this is the way God made us.

Alexander the Great conquered much of what his contemporaries considered to be the known world. The story is told of Alexander traveling down a road and happening upon a beggar. The beggar had no right to call out to the emperor but cry out he did and he asked for some money. Alexander stopped and gave the beggar several gold coins. His advisors immediately chastised him, “My Lord, surely a few copper coins would have suited the beggar.” Alexander replied, “Yes, it would have suited the beggar’s need but not Alexander’s giving!”

May your giving express the way God has made you.