

“So You Might Become Rich,” 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 (Third Sunday After Pentecost, June 30, 2019)

We want you to know, brothers, about the **grace of God** that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the **favor** of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this **act of grace**. ⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this **act of grace** also.

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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 by his poverty might become rich. ¹⁰ And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹ So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

PRAY

We are working our way through the book of 2 Corinthians on Sundays at Grace Bible and this afternoon we come to chapter eight, and as it was read maybe some of you thought you were sure what was coming – a sermon on giving, specifically tithing.

Several years ago I was back in my hometown visiting with my parents, and my mom had their wedding album out on their kitchen table. They were married at First Methodist Church of Kosciusko, Mississippi in February, 1963, a little more than fifty-six years ago. As I flipped through these pictures there’s one of my mom and dad cutting the cake in the fellowship hall of that church. Behind them in that picture you can see a sign hanging on the wall, and it said, “Obey God ... Tithe!” And I thought, “Where can I get some of those signs for Grace Bible?” No, my first reaction was, “You don’t see that anymore.” Granted, you do in some traditions. A lot of TV preachers talk about money all the time. But I think in our circles churches and pastors just aren’t that up front and in-your-face about money. Some of you are glad about that because you’ve heard lots of sermons on this topic and been made to feel browbeaten and guilty. But others think we’ve lost something because churches don’t talk about it much.

Our passage today does address giving, but that’s not the heart of this passage. At its root, I hope to show you, this passage is about grace. Five times Paul uses the Greek word *charis* in this

passage. He writes in verse 1 about a particular “grace of God,” and then he follows that up by talking about a specific “act of grace” in verses 6 and 7.

That’s what I want to talk about this afternoon, this “grace” that does lead to giving. Three points: first, what this grace is. Second, where it comes from. Third, the results of this grace.

First, what this grace is. Paul tells us that this grace is the ability, or the freedom, to give your money away. This grace, this freedom to give, is marked by three things. If these three things aren’t present, you don’t have this grace.

Let’s read verses 1-5: “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

The first characteristic that marks this grace is that you can give *sacrificially*. That’s from verse 2. In 2 Corinthians, Paul is writing **to** the church at Corinth. Corinth was a wealthy city. It was located on an important trading route in the Mediterranean, so they had the benefit of lots of commerce and all the customs and taxes that were involved with trade. The Corinthian church was flush with money.

But in chapter eight Paul writes **about** the church in Macedonia, and Macedonia was a backwater in the ancient world. It was not on any important trading route, and since no money ever came through Macedonia, there was never any money in Macedonia. They were poor. This week some in our church are going to minister in a village in Honduras, building a house and helping them with a community garden. In that village almost everyone lives on \$5/day or less. The last time the ministry we work with down there surveyed the village (three or four years ago) there were still a couple of families who live on \$1/day. That kind of poverty boggles the mind.

Macedonia is that kind of poor, yet in spite of that they give. Paul writes in verse 3 that the Macedonians “gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means.” For us, if we give we can’t go on a vacation or we can only eat out twice per month instead of twice per week, it feels like we’ve given beyond our means. For them, it meant that in order to give they had to skip meals. They had to go hungry. That’s the only thing “beyond their means” could mean in the context of people who are already poor.

Now that fact, in and of itself, is not unusual. To this day it is a commonly known sociological fact that the poor give in far greater proportions than the rich. You’ve seen these studies before. Mississippi is always at the bottom of the list of states when it comes to per capita income. It’s always a race between Mississippi and Arkansas to see who is going to be 50th, the poorest state.

But Mississippi is always at the top when it comes to charitable giving, one of the top three. Connecticut, meanwhile, is almost always in the top five of per capita income, and in the bottom five when it comes to giving.

So this grace involves more than just giving sacrificially. *Second, it involves giving freely, without any form of guilt or compulsion.* Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to donate money, but we haven't yet talked about what it is or who it is Paul wants the Corinthians to donate to.

Almost always when you hear this passage taught, the way the preacher applies it is that the money needs to go to his church, or to the ministry of the preacher himself in case of the TV preachers. Or, this passage is taught as reinforcing the idea of tithing. The word "tithe" actually means "one tenth," and typically the idea is that you must devote one tenth of your pre-tax income to the local church you attend. For example, under this understanding, it would mean that if you attend Grace Bible Church, then you must give ten percent of your gross income to Grace Bible Church. Anyway, that's the scheme I was taught for years.

I want to be as clear as I possibly can: *Paul is not trying to get the Corinthians to donate money to their own local congregation nor is he trying to get them to donate to his own evangelistic organization.* He is collecting money for the relief of believers in Jerusalem who are even worse off than the Macedonian Christians were. The believers in Jerusalem were from a Jewish background, and when they formed their own churches and started proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah, the majority Jewish population began persecuting them severely and many of them had to flee their homes and lost everything they had. A few years after the persecution, a severe famine struck the land so that these already impoverished, harassed Christians were left utterly destitute.

We read about this collection all over the New Testament. We read about it in the book of Romans, where Paul writes, "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. ²⁶ For Macedonia and Achaia [that's Corinth] have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem." Romans 15:25-26. We read about it in Galatians. Luke writes about it in Acts 24:17, where he describes Paul delivering the offering to the believers in Jerusalem.

This passage is not about tithing or giving to the local church. It's about giving to the poor. I'll go so far as to say this: there is no biblical command that applies to Christians today that requires them to give a tenth of the income, or any other percentage of their income, to the local church. There were tithes in the Old Testament that went to the support of the religious system surrounding the temple, but those commands do not directly apply to the church today.

We do not collect tithes at Grace Bible Church. We slip up and use that word sometimes, but we shouldn't because it's a total misnomer. Grace Bible Church as an organization that pays rent and pays salaries and buys materials and supports other ministries, survives off of the *freewill offerings* of people who decide to give, whether they are members or not. That's it – no tithes in this passage, no tithes in the local church, no compulsory giving.

Once you have that context, this passage becomes clear. In verse 4 Paul writes that the Macedonians "beg[ged] us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." The Macedonians, apparently, heard of the need in Jerusalem and went to Paul, not the other way around, and begged him to be able to give. Apparently, Paul tried to talk them out of it because

they were so poor, yet they prevailed on him and gave anyway. In verse 8, we read where Paul says about the Corinthians and their giving, “I say this **not as a command**, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.”

The kind of grace Paul writes about enable the Macedonians and Corinthians to give in an entirely voluntary way.

Third, this grace enables one to give not only sacrificially, not only freely, but joyfully. “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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.” 2 Corinthians 8:1-2. The Macedonians begged Paul for the chance to skip meals to give to poor believers in another part of the world, and in so doing they were overflowing with joy.

Now, does that sound crazy to you? It should, because it goes against everything our world and our culture tells us. You almost wonder as you read this if we’re supposed to take this seriously or if Paul is messing with us when it calls this ability to give a “grace.”

In the book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, there’s a place where Tom’s Aunt Polly has ordered Tom on pain of severe punishment to paint the picket fence in front of their house. And Tom is miserable. He knows all the other boys are playing together and he wants more than anything else to get out of this work.

But Tom is always scheming, and when his friend Ben Rodgers walks by Tom knows just what to do. Ben starts to make fun of Tom and say, “Poor old Tom Sawyer. I’m going swimming. Don’t you wish you could swim instead of having to work?” And Tom stops painting and says, “Why Ben! I didn’t even notice you there. What do you mean by work?” And Ben says, “Isn’t painting that fence work?” Tom replies, “Well, maybe it is and maybe it isn’t. All I know is that it suits me just fine.” Ben says, “Oh come on, Tom! Don’t tell me you like it!”

Tom gets real serious and says, “Ben, I do like it, because it’s not every day that a boy gets to paint a fence.” Ben stares at Tom, but Tom goes back to painting. A stroke here, a stroke there, like the fence is his canvas and he is Rembrandt. The next thing Ben says is, “Tom, uh, would it be ok if I tried it for a few minutes?” And haggling back and forth, Tom “lets” Ben paint the fence for the price of an apple, and by the end of the day Tom’s roped in a dozen other boys to finish the job and gets all kinds of toys in the bargain.

A cynical person would say Paul is pulling a Tom Sawyer on the Corinthians: “Oh, church at Corinth, let me tell you about the grace of giving your money away!”

But he’s not pulling a Tom Sawyer. Second, where this grace comes from. You see a lot of us already know what it’s like to joyfully give our possessions away. We’re parents, and when you have children you have to make sacrifices for them, and once in a while you can even do it joyfully. And of course if something horrible happened, if one of our children was struck down by some disease and the only medicine that could possibly save their lives would cost us every

penny we had, we would do it freely and joyfully. We would do it and wouldn't think twice about it.

So we can be sure Paul is no Tom Sawyer and he is serious when he writes of this grace of giving. But of course the difference is that as parents we aren't really "sacrificing" for our children. We're providing for them. That's part of the deal of being a parent, and it is expected of us. We don't give medals to moms and dads for taking care of their kids.

Paul is talking about giving sacrificially, freely, and joyfully to strangers. That's different. So how can we do that? "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 by his poverty might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8:9.

Christians, do you know what you were to God before you met Jesus? You were strangers. That's Ephesians 2:12, where Paul says you were "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." You were alienated from God by your sins, and in a very real way *he knew you not*.

Verse nine says that Jesus, though rich, became poor. When, friends, did Jesus become poor? On the cross? No, he was poor before then. "When he was arrested?" No. When he quit carpentry work to preach full-time? No.

Jesus became poor when he left the throne room of heaven and his rightful place as sovereign over the universe to take on flesh. God became a human being! Think about it! Human beings are pretty high up the biological food chain, and slugs (shell-less snails) are pretty low. Plus, they're just kind of gross. If you had the chance, would you become a slug? Probably not. I've thought I might want to be an eagle for a few hours so I could fly around or maybe a thoroughbred so I could run like the wind, but I've never wanted to become a slug.

But as far as the distance is between humans and slugs, *it still is nothing compared to the distance between God and man*. For a human being to become a slug, that's still a transition between two created beings. But for God to become a man, that's a transition from the Creator to the created.

And in becoming a man, Jesus didn't just become a man for a few hours, or days, or even only for thirty-three years. Jesus is forever united with humanity, fully God and fully man. No one would want to be the one and only man-slug, but Jesus will forever be the one and only God-man.

Friends, that's how Jesus became poor. And then, on the cross, he lost the one thing he had left – his consciousness of the perfect love of the Father, as the Father poured out his wrath on Jesus in our place for our sins.

No one has ever and no one will ever become poor like that again. But Jesus did it for you. He did it for you and for all who would ever trust in him.

And it's not just that Jesus became poor. Paul says that we through his poverty might become rich. Jesus lacked nothing when he sat on his throne as the sovereign of the universe. All things were his, and Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3 that in Christ now all things belong to us. In Romans 8 Paul actually calls us co-heirs with Christ. Legally, Paul says, we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Everything Jesus has earned as God's Son belongs to us as well, and one day when Jesus returns and we enter into the new heaven and the new earth with our resurrected, glorified bodies we will receive our inheritance.

Friends, to the degree you see how Jesus became poor so that you might become rich, to the degree that wonderful news digs deep down into your heart and becomes its new foundation, to that degree you won't want to hoard your possessions but you'll joyfully, freely, and sacrificially want to give them away, even to strangers.

Third, the results of this grace. Two things: *first, in light of this good news, we must plan to exercise this grace – it won't happen naturally.* That's verses 10-12: "And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹ So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have."

The Corinthians had apparently started the preparations of making this offering to the Jerusalem church a year prior, but some turmoil in the church had derailed the effort. But in verse 11 Paul gives the only command in the passage, the command to execute by finishing what they had already begun.

It is not enough to only have good intentions when it comes to giving. This grace is no good without a plan. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul writes about this gift and says, "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² 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." Paul tells the Corinthians to set something aside every week, in part because he knows that with a plan like that more will be collected over time than if you just do it once.

Our passage for today is just part of a larger passage on giving and generosity, and in two weeks after we get back from Honduras we'll look at the second half of it in chapter nine and talk in specifics about what it looks like to give. So think of today and the first half of a two-part sermon series on the grace of giving, and we'll do more application in two weeks. But I will say this before we move on: I've known some Christians who have said, "I don't have a plan to my giving. I just give when the Holy Spirit prompts me." I certainly want you to give when the Holy Spirit prompts you, but the example we have in the Scripture (which is, after all, inspired by the Holy Spirit) is to plan to give. The Holy Spirit speaks to you through his Word, not just in any impressions you might receive throughout the week. To fail to sit down with your budget, with your bank statement, with your family, your accountant, your estate attorney, and make a deliberate, focused, plan to give your money away, will be in practice **a failure to exercise the grace of giving.** In Paul's mind there's no contradiction between free, sacrificial, and joyful giving on the one hand and a plan to give on the other.

The second result of this grace is you can know you'll always be taken care of. That's verses 13-15: "For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, 'Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.'"

You will not find in church history one instance of someone exercising this grace of giving who then said, "I didn't have enough to live on." Not one. You'll find a lot of examples of people worried for a period of time, who did not know how the Lord would provide, but who ultimately found that the Lord did provide and that they could happily live off of a lot less than they originally thought they could.

Right now Jeff Bezos is the richest man in the world, and that's even after he got divorced earlier this year and his wife got \$35 billion in Amazon stock as part of the settlement.

Imagine you're walking on the Square one day and you meet Jeff Bezos. Highly unlikely, I know, but maybe he loves to shop at Square Books. You meet him, he likes you, you begin a friendship, and after a while he says to you, "I want to do something for you. I want to make sure you know you'll always be looked after financially. I'm going to give you a million dollars now and set up a trust fund so that when you retire and stop working you won't have to rely on Social Security or your savings. You'll be set until you die."

Would you live differently if that happened to you? I would. But I'm not sure it would make me more generous. I'd certainly be grateful to the man, but it wouldn't have been a sacrifice at all for him to do it, so I'm not sure I'd care to sacrifice for anyone else.

But the result of the grace of giving is perfect provision from the God who loves us now until we die and, then, we come into our inheritance. Then, things get really good. That's what we are living for.

The best even the richest man in the world can offer you is a little more physical comfort while you're on earth. But this life is just a drop in the ocean compared to eternity. We have the riches of the universe at our disposal through Jesus Christ, and when we see that and how he sacrificed for us, then we'll want to give. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.
AMEN