

# This Act of Grace of Giving

2 Corinthians 8-9

Key Verse: 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 by his poverty might become rich."

We began this year 2024 with a 4-part special series on Worship, Identity, Prayer and Giving. We were inspired and challenged in the first 3 weeks to grow in our worship, in our identity in Jesus Christ, and in our prayer lives by the help of the Holy Spirit. Now, we want to be inspired and challenged about our giving in our Christian lives.

Regarding today's Bible passage, 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, written by Apostle Paul, the Christian scholar and pastor John Stott wrote a short, powerful message with the title, "The Grace of Giving." Going straight through these two chapters, he made 10 points regarding Christian giving:

1. Christian giving is an expression of the grace of God (8:1-6).
2. Christian giving can be a gift of the Holy Spirit (8:7).
3. Christian giving is inspired by the cross of Christ (8:8-9).
4. Christian giving is proportionate giving (8:10-12).
5. Christian giving contributes to equality (8:13-15).
6. Christian giving must be carefully supervised (8:16-24).
7. Christian giving can be stimulated by a little friendly competition (9:1-5).
8. Christian giving resembles a harvest (9:6-11a).
9. Christian giving has symbolic significance (9:13).
10. Christian giving promotes thanksgiving to God (9:11b-15).

My message will not cover all ten points or the entire passage verse by verse but a few highlights. Why are we studying a message or Bible passage with the theme of Giving? I want to share an brief introduction from our senior pastor's inspiration on studying this topic:

"As God's people, giving to God and to others is essential. Yet giving can sometimes seem like a mere duty, a law, or even a burden. We want to come back to the heart of why we give, in what ways we can give, and renew in us the true spirit of Christian giving. After this study, regular members will be invited to renew their annual world mission offering pledges, and newcomers, to make new pledges. May God grow us as those whose giving is full of the grace of Jesus in 2024."

As noted above, this message has 3 parts: First, the motivation of grace (8:9). Second, the sowing and reaping principle (9:6,8). Third, the giving attitude that pleases God (9:7).

First, the motivation of grace (8:9).

Apostle Paul gave some very interesting words about Jesus in Acts 20:35. Author Luke puts these words in the mouth of Paul: "In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we

must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" It is interesting to note that we can't find these exact words of Jesus in any of the four gospels. Perhaps Luke 6:38 is closest: "...give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you." Actually, Apostle Paul caught the whole spirit of Jesus' life: a life of giving. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Jesus' whole life proved this point. Jesus lived a life of giving.

Many scholars regard Mark 10:45 as the key verse of Mark's gospel. Jesus says, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus gave his life as a ransom to free those who believe in him, those who trust in him, those who love him, those who obey him, from the slavery of sin and death and condemnation in hell.

This is also the point of the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16: "'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'" God gave his only Son Jesus Christ to our fallen, sin sick world. God gave him over to be hated and killed. Why? Because he loves us. Because he wants to save us. Because he wants to give us eternal life, rather than judgment, which is what we all deserve for our wickedness, rebellion, and sins against God and against people.

Paul wanted to unite Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. They were naturally enemies who didn't associate with each other. But in Jesus Christ, they were one, in theory. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul says there are no divisions among Christians. We are all in the same family in Christ Jesus. To help make this practically so, Paul asked the non-Jewish Christians to make an offering to the suffering, impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Christians in Jerusalem were suffering rejection and poverty. Remember that the culture in Jerusalem was against Jesus. They crucified him. So Christians were also rejected. Paul wanted the Gentile Christians to show love to them by sending them an offering.

Paul urged the Corinth church in southern Greece to follow the sacrificial example of the Macedonian churches further north, which were in Philippi and Thessalonica. In fact, he urged the Christians in these two regions to try to outgive one another. He boasted about their spirit of giving and urged them to complete the pledges of offerings that they made.

Sometimes the Christian radio stations in Chicago have fundraisers. People call in to make monthly pledges. Some months later the radio host says, "Please send in your promised pledges!" They needed to fulfill their promised contributions. They needed to put their money where their mouth is (that is, do what they said they would do).

Many times in these two chapters Paul used the word "grace." Listen to 8:1-5:

"We want you to know, brothers (and sisters), about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. For they gave according

to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor (or grace) of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

Then Paul uses the phrase “act of grace” two times in the next two sentences (6-7):

“Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 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.”

What is this “act of grace”? Is the grace of giving. Paul goes on (8): “I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.” Genuine love is not talk, it is action. It is giving.

Why should Christians be so giving? Because we bear the name of Christ. Jesus Christ. The one who gave his life to save us. Paul declares in a most beautiful Bible 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 by his poverty might become rich.”

In this world, people naturally aspire for better things, higher position, more prestige, more wealth. Every parent naturally wants a better life for their children. No parent delights to see their children suffer. And we naturally think that all suffering is bad and to be avoided. Therefore, get as much as you can and enjoy as much as can, while you can, for as long as you can, before you die. That seems to be the mantra of the world.

But look at Jesus! He is the King of heaven, who came from eternal glory into this world. He left the glory of heaven to come into our cursed, imperfect, dying world. We would expect the Prince of Heaven to come as prince, in a palace, with a royal guard, and servants to serve his every need. But that’s not how Jesus came. He came as the son of a poor carpenter. He wasn’t born in a palace but in an animal’s stable. He didn’t have an army surrounding him, but a group of impetuous, immature ragtag disciples: fishermen, a tax collector, a Zealot. Though he was rich, he became poor. He did not have his own home or donkey. He had to borrow a donkey to ride into Jerusalem. Jesus had no impressive credentials or position in society. He was a traveling preacher, a friend of tax collectors and wayward, disrespected people. Why? It was to make us all rich. It was to bless and save us all. He took up our infirmities and sorrows and transgressions. Finally, he was arrested, unjustly tried, beaten, whipped, spat upon, and forced to carry a cross upon which his body was nailed and lifted to die for all the world to see. Jesus became poor, so that we could become eternally rich, heirs—sons and daughters—of his kingdom.

This is the amazing, marvelous, wonderful grace of Jesus. This is why Christians give with a thankful mind, for the grace of Jesus Christ poured out for us. Jesus gave his life for us. What have we given for him? In this spirit, giving is not a burden. It is a privilege. We give not because we have to, but because we get to. We are privileged to give ourselves, first to the Lord for his glory, then to others for their blessing.

Second, the sowing and reaping principle (9:6,8).

Twice Paul mentions that there may be fairness or equality among believers (8:13-14). Wealthy believers should give to alleviate the suffering and plight of poor believers. Paul quotes a Jewish Scripture about equality (15): "As it is written, 'Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.'" This verse from Exodus 16:18 refers to God's provision of manna in the wilderness, the bread from heaven. This bread was to be collected each day by each family, just enough for each day. Similarly, Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us each day our daily bread" (Lk 11:3). Jesus taught us to come to God daily in prayer, relying on God. We are urged to come to God and to depend on God every day, not once a week at church.

In 9:6 Paul mentions an important principle in giving. We can call it the sowing and reaping principle: "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." This is a simple truth in farming. Reaping a harvest requires sowing seeds. If you sow only a few seeds, you cannot expect a big harvest. But if you sow many seeds, you can expect, with God's blessing, a good harvest. Of course, farming, like gardening, requires a lot of hard work and care for the sowing, fertilizing, watering/irrigating, etc. I've seen beautiful, fruitful vegetable gardens of several church members. Those gardens don't grow on their own, with no labor. They require much labor. But much labor produces a good harvest.

Paul equates sowing here with a giving spirit. Basically, Paul is saying that stingy people will have little reward. Generous people will produce an abundant harvest, not only of materials, but of righteousness. Paul quotes the description of a righteous person in Psalm 112:9, "As it is written, 'He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.'"

Paul then comments in confident faith, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God" (10-11).

So, how is your giving? I want to share with you some challenging words of John Wesley (1703-1791). One of Wesley's frequent sermons was titled, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth..." (Mt 6:19). He said that Christians should give away all but "the plain necessities of life"—that is, plain, wholesome food, clean clothes and enough to carry on one's business. All income should be given to the poor after one satisfies bare necessities. Wesley was exemplary in his giving as a Christian.

So, how is your giving? Most people think they are generous, giving people, even more than average. In my graduate course I recently read the book, "The Happiness Hypothesis," by Jonathan Haidt. He notes research that says people think they are more generous than others and will give more than average. At the same time, they judge that people will not give so much when asked to donate. It turns out, that they are pretty accurate in viewing others, but they grossly overestimate their own giving. The point is: people don't know themselves as well as others know them. People aren't as giving as they think.

Another powerful verse is 9:8, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." Did you catch all the superlatives Paul used in that sentence? All grace, all sufficiency, all things, all times, every good work. And Paul uses the word "abound" twice. God is able to bless us to be generous. God is not lacking in any resources. God is not poor. He owns the cattle on a thousand hillsides, and everything else.

I was surprised to learn that my own giving was less than the previous year, even though I had a few good reasons to increase my giving. This gives me cause to reevaluate my giving, as long as my wife agrees. Again, I regard myself as a generous, giving person. But if someone challenges my giving, I am not happy. This leads to the final part.

Third, the giving attitude that pleases God (9:7).

9:7 is a well known Bible verse: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Several times in these chapters Paul addresses a right attitude toward giving. Our giving should not be forced or unwilling, like a magnet is holding or money to our hands or wallets and we can't let go. God loves a cheerful giver. Of course, God loves all people. But this means that God delights when we give freely and generously. Why? Because it is just like God. God gave freely and sacrificially all things to us through Christ. Romans 8:32 says, "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" Paul was quite confident in God's giving love. Paul experienced it firsthand.

Have you experienced God's grace in Jesus Christ to you? If so, you can give joyfully and cheerfully, not grudgingly or reluctantly. This pertains to all of life. Do you walk around with a grumpy spirit? Remember God's grace. Do you sometimes feel like an angry dog ready to bark or bite? Remember Jesus Christ.

"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." May God make us generous, willing, joyful givers all the more in this year in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.