

“Connected in Generosity”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

November 5, 2017

It is now November so there are a few things you can count on. One, as started this week for us, is the mailbox full of catalogs. Every store you can imagine with glossy photos of things you absolutely **MUST** have for Christmas if you are any kind of worthwhile person, right?

The other thing you can count on in November is fund-raising letters. End of the year and they start to pile in, alongside those catalogs. Well, even here in the Bible, 2 Corinthians 8, we find a fund-raising letter. The Church in Jerusalem had struggled mightily with famine and persecution, and the Apostle Paul was raising money to relieve their distress throughout Macedonia, and in this particular church in Corinth.

What would you say if you wanted to motivate God’s people to give?

2 Corinthians 8:1–15 (ESV)

8 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.

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. And in this matter I give my judgement: 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.”

I read a story (not sure if it’s true...but it’ll preach) about the worship of a congregation in Edinburgh a long while ago. When time came for collecting the offering, a man accidentally placed in the collection a large coin instead of a penny. You can easily see how that may happen, right? Putting the wrong coin in the plate, he was left with a decision to make. Do you reach in and take it out again and replace it with something different? But you only do that if no one is looking, it seems. So the gentleman grimaced and asked for the one taking up the collection to return the larger coin so he could replace it with a smaller one.

But the thing to note is that this was Scotland, a land notorious for being thrifty. So the usher replied, “in once, in forever.” Hmm. What now? So the giver retorted, “well, I guess I’ll get credit for it in heaven.” The usher calmly responded, “No, I think you’ll get credit for the penny.”¹

Why do we give? Like this Scot, in order to get credit in heaven? To make ourselves feel good? To fulfill some sense of obligation upon us? Why? And how much should we give in order to tick the box of propriety in our giving?

So often when we think about giving or stewardship of our money, we focus on the how much question. Should I tithe gross income or net? To whom should I tithe? These are really good questions to consider, but Paul calls us to go much deeper.

Instead of a letter enforcing a rule for how much we give, Paul’s approach was that if we rightly see the **answer to the why question**, then the “how much” question seems put in its proper place. So, briefly this morning, as we consider our own giving to the body of Christ, **why do we give?**

¹ Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians*, Preaching the Word Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), p. 160.

1. Giving is response to the gift of God's grace.

If you look through chapters 8-9, you will see the motive of giving is called grace eight times! The grace of God is the favor of God given to sinners who do not deserve it, yet received as a gift, THAT motivates the giving away of resources and even ourselves.

To put a fine point on the argument, Paul speaks of the Macedonians in vs. 1-5. These churches throughout the region of Macedonia had struggled mightily. In fact, Paul labeled their situation “**extreme poverty**” in v. 2, or more literally a “**down to the depths poverty**” or we could colloquially call it, dirt poor. They were dirt poor and yet, v. 2, **their joy overflowed in a wealth of generosity**. That is incredible. What would make a people who were dirt poor produce an overflow of wealth of generosity? Even, as v. 4, **said, they begged for the favor of giving away what little they had?**

They knew and experienced the Jesus of v. 9, **who though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich**. Jesus was “impoverished” by taking on human flesh, entering into our sinful and broken world, leaving the throne of heaven and living in the dirt in poverty himself, taking our sin on himself which took him to be crucified under the curse of God, for our sake. Jesus gave himself up, went to the cross, under the wrath and curse of God, so that WE might be made to enjoy the riches of eternity with him.

These dirt-poor folks knew the Jesus who laid aside his advantages. He disadvantaged himself in order to extend advantage to rebels and sinners like them, like us. They knew and loved the One who gave up everything in order to bless us, who were his enemies. It was that undeserved favor, the love and mercy of God given to us when we deserve just the opposite, his willingness to step into our lives at such a deep cost to himself, that took command in their hearts that motivated them to follow and do likewise.

Do you see what Paul was showing the wealthier Corinthians, now? How much they had did NOT determine whether they could give. Instead, what they had received from Jesus determined whether they could give. Giving was a giving of themselves in response to the grace given to us in Christ, and as v. 8, suggests, our giving MANIFESTS our love for him. Giving of ourselves is rooted in grace, not in our wealth, nor really in what the church has done for me.

The church is not a club to which we pay dues. The body of Christ is not a place where our giving buys influence, nor a place I give to as long as the elders do what I want them to do. We don't give because if we don't we feel guilty. We give because we've had our guilt removed by Jesus' work for an undeserving people!

We give out of an abundance of joy over what Jesus has done for us in our salvation and our union with other brothers and sisters. AND because Jesus continues to pour out his grace to us and through us to others! Jesus gave himself to free us to give of ourselves to others around us around the world and down the block. Jesus gave, therefore, we give. Further, Jesus continues to give, so we give all the more. His grace is alive in us now. When we give, we manifest his grace at work in us and through us.

If we have a hard time giving our resources to the body of Christ, perhaps we need to spend more time focusing on the cross than on our bank accounts. The root of generosity is the radical generosity of Jesus toward us. How generous do you feel?

2. Give what you have, not what you don't.

This point may seem obvious. On some level it is, yet on another, we often live by comparisons when we focus on giving. Do I give as much as another person, or perhaps feeling my giving may not matter as much because I don't have a lot to give. Or on the other side, my giving matters more because I give more.

Certainly the dirt poor Macedonians did not have a great deal to give to relieve the suffering of the church in Jerusalem. Neither did Paul proscribe how much the church in Corinth should give. Rather than stressing over not being able to give as much as another, Paul says v. 12, **if you are motivated by God's grace in Christ, give according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.**

This would have been a wonderful time to reinforce the principle of the tithe, we may think. Many of us have not ever considered what the Bible has to say about the “tithe.”

In the Old Testament, the tithe was a Law they were bound by, to give 10% of what they had to support the work of the people of God. It was an obligation to give to the kingdom of Israel. We may expect that this would be a great place for Paul to reinforce the bedrock commitment to give.

But Paul goes much deeper in v. 15, by bring us back not to the tithe, but to quote Exodus 16, where manna was collected when the Israelites wandered in the desert.

You may know the story. The people had been freed from slavery Egypt and began to grumble that Moses had led them out into the desert to starve. So in Exodus 16, God says he would provide manna, this bread from heaven, in the morning that they were to collect.

But they were only to collect enough manna for a day. Gathering it up was hard work, and some folks could pick up more than others. But, as people gathered they supported one another so everyone had what was needed. Do you remember what happened if you tried to hoard the leftovers up instead of sharing with others in need? Maggots. Worms got it. If you kept more than you needed, or didn't share your excess with others who didn't have enough, it rotted and didn't last.

Now this is where it gets interesting. Don't worry; Paul isn't teaching some socialist ideal where all our resources are pooled and distributed equally. If that were the case, then he would have called on the wealthy Corinthians not only to help the folks in Jerusalem, but also to relieve the poverty of the Macedonians, too. He's not a socialist revolutionary.

BUT, he is pushing us hard to give what we have if we have ears to hear him. By reminding us of the Exodus passage, Paul is pointing you and me the standard, or the call, actually much deeper than a call to a tithe. Here's how.

First, we may look at our money, our resources as ours, what we've earned. But Paul challenges that perspective a bit by comparing what we have to the collection of manna. Our money is just as much a gift of God as was the manna in the Exodus. No one would go out and say, "But I worked so hard to earn all this manna," right? God is the one who provided the gift. The same is true with all our resources. Who gave us the gifts, the talents, the experiences, the relationships, the whatever, to earn what we have in the first place? God did; what we have NOW is as much a gift as was manna in the desert. So if we respond, "But I earned it," Paul reminds, "No, you were given it."

Second, and in more challenging fashion, Paul speaks to what we do with that gift. Remember what happened if Israelites kept too much of the manna, if they hoarded it? It rotted; maggots ate it. Paul is suggesting that if we try to keep for ourselves too much of what can benefit someone else it won't keep; it will rot. How? It won't ever feel like enough; you can never save yourself or consume yourself into a full heart and life.

We have been given so much, and we have a call to pour out what we have been given in order to bless someone else. This is not an argument against saving; instead, it is the Bible's argument for investing in God's work among God's people. It is an argument for a radical generosity, not with a focus on what we give but on how: in deep generosity. It is a call to our own Macedonian Challenge at Central.

What do I give? We give what we have. Paul in v. 13 uses a different standard than I often do. I think, I have a lot left over, so if I give it away I won't feel the loss. I can check the 10% box and be done with it all. But Paul's standard in vs. 13-14 is "don't give yourself into being burdened so that someone has to relieve you. Give, but not so much that somebody has to bail you out." In other words, give to such a degree that the question we wrestle with is, "Am I giving too much that I am being left destitute? Am I giving so that I am now in poverty, too?" Wow. How much am I supposed to give? I don't know, but I do know Paul is saying this: if I am not prevented from doing or having some of the things I want to do or have, then I'm probably not giving enough. If my giving never restricts my splurging on self, I'm not giving enough. Our giving must be radical enough that there isn't left enough for all MY comforts because I'm investing in YOUR blessing. That was Paul's measure. That's challenging, isn't it?

He's not saying to give what we don't have. Neither is he shaming someone whose monetary gift is smaller than someone else's. But look for ways to use what you do have for someone else's blessing. Some may not have money to give, but you do have other blessings: friendship, experience, comforts, skills to pass along. Look for ways to give what you have.

That's a different measure on my life and it makes me uncomfortable, frankly. But don't shoot the messenger; this is God's Word to us.

Where in the world will we find the power to give ourselves away like that? Grace. Only the undeserved grace of God giving us so much better than we could dream, will overflow into an abundance of joy that produces a generosity of life. One commentator wrote this: "Only the greater treasure of the kingdom of God can free us from clinging to some competing treasures of this world."² If like me, you are struggling to take in and live what we are shown in this text, then with me look at the cross once more. There we will find the Lord Jesus who truly did give himself into poverty into destitution, so that by his gift, we receive eternal life.

² Scott Hafeman, *2 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 357.