

# WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER

By Steve Zeisler

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You have probably seen the various ways that those who want to help you invest your money advertise their services. On television and in other media, companies promise that if you will follow their investment advice, all manner of good things will come your way—security, riches, attractive companions, and so forth. One advertisement that sticks in my mind has the tag line, "Thank you, Paine Webber." It usually shows someone like a late middle-aged man casually leaning against a \$60,000 automobile or a woman dripping with jewels—clear indications of opulence. The music and visuals conspire together to indicate that Paine Webber will really take good care of you.

I'd like you to imagine a different sort of person giving investment advice this morning. Instead of a wealthy gentleman leaning against his Rolls Royce, imagine a first century citizen of Macedonia (northern Greece), characterized not so much by his clothes or possessions as by the joy in his countenance. He has learned some lessons about investments, if you will, that have blessed both him and other people. He stands before us as an example of one who has invested in that which will never rot, rust, or fade.

I'm not too concerned about declaring our responsibilities in this area this morning; the Bible does that in many places. My concern in teaching the passage before us, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, is more about what should motivate us in our giving. What gives life and joy to the prospect of caring for other people? How can we find ourselves thrilled to be about our Father's business in this area?

## **A pattern for giving**

Let me recall some background. As you may know, Paul had been in a tense relationship with his friends in Corinth. He had founded the church and he loved them, but they had locked horns with each other on a number of points. Immediately prior to the writing of this letter, Paul had anxiously waited in Macedonia for his friend Titus to arrive and give him news of how the church in Corinth was doing. When Titus came he reported that they were doing very well; they had repented of some of their selfishness and were no longer angry with Paul.

One of the reasons the apostle wrote this letter and sent it back to Corinth with Titus was to remind them that he would come shortly himself, and that he would receive the contributions they had been making for some time in order to take it to the desperately poor saints in Jerusalem. The Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem had suffered awful persecution, famine, and poverty, and the Gentile churches in Macedonia, Asia Minor, Achaia, and other places around the Roman empire had agreed to take up a collection. So Paul is indicating in this letter that Titus will help the Corinthians make ready the money they have to give.

Paul knew it would be important for the Gentiles to offer something to the Jews. The church had received much from its foundation in Judaism. The Messiah came from the nation of Israel, as did the Old Testament scriptures. But there often was difficulty in the relationships between Gentiles and Jews, and Paul reasoned that if the Gentile churches were to express their gratitude with these gifts, it would go a long way toward healing the tensions.

In 1 Corinthians, a letter written a year or more prior to this one, Paul says in chapter 16, verse 2:

On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

The Corinthians were supposed to have been in the habit of setting aside whatever amount they chose to give every week and saving it, so Paul could just take it and deliver it to Jerusalem, instead of having a big fund-raising effort when he came. As we'll see, that pattern of regular giving was not taking place, and chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians provide wise counsel and correction.

### **To have made God's heart rejoice because of our choices is the greatest of all rewards**

There is one last point of background I'd like to bring out. Compared to Achaia, the southern region of Greece, Macedonia would have been a bit less sophisticated, less wealthy, less impressed with itself. The cities of Corinth and Athens and the other great, ancient cities of Greek culture tended to look at the people of the northern regions as country cousins.

The main body of the text we're studying is Paul's comparison of the churches of Macedonia and Corinth. The Corinthians will find themselves needing to follow the example of those they probably looked down on. That observation may have some important lessons for us as well. We may think of ourselves as sophisticated people, but any unwillingness we have to learn from those who seem to us to be less sophisticated is foolish.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5:

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.

### **The Macedonian example**

In this paragraph, the example of the Macedonians is laid before the Corinthian readers and before us. It is a great example. Our friend the Macedonian investment counselor is standing before us with joy on his face, indicating that we too can make choices that will bring blessing to us. There are three things in this example that I would like to highlight.

The first is that the Macedonians' giving in response to the needs of others began with the recognition that they had been given a great deal themselves. First and foremost, they were recipients of the grace of God. "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." These people believed that ministry to their needs had already been made. The Lord had found them in darkness, given them life, met the needs of their hearts, and offered them an unfading hope. So they approached the whole subject of giving with gratitude already reverberating inside them. Look at the extraordinary statement in verse 2; this is an example of what it means to have been treated graciously: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." They were people living under persecution, not wealthy to begin with, some of them suffering extreme poverty. Yet joy characterized their lives---they had the approval of their heavenly Father, the power of the Spirit to face trials, and the knowledge that no one could take these things away from them. The fact that joy was their experience even under difficult circumstances testified to them that God was good. Therefore, their natural response was a desire to be generous themselves. Joy amidst sorrow is an indication that God is present and at work.

The second point I would make about the example of the Macedonian Christians is that they considered it a privilege to give to the brothers and sisters in need. It wasn't a burden or something they discharged as quickly as they could, even hoping to avoid it. Look at the end of verse 3: "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints." They realized that their fellow believers in Jerusalem were their family. So they counted it an honor to be a blessing to their poor brothers and sisters somewhere else, whose lives they couldn't otherwise touch, through this process of giving to meet their needs. They were grateful to be part of God's care for his own.

Next Sunday night we'll be hearing a missions report of a team from PBC sent to minister in Indonesia, specifically to the province of Timor at the eastern end of that archipelago-far from the main population centers. I remember traveling with a similar team from the island of Timor to the much more rural, poor, and backward (by our standards of technology) island of Semau and visiting the church there. There were wonderful Christian people in a village where the poverty was extreme. On a little hill stood a simply-made, white cement block building. It was their kindergarten, built with money donated by a family in our church. I know this family experienced absolute joy in giving to that project. Once the local children began getting an education, the government schools would accept them, and the possibility of breaking out of the cycle of poverty was provided. So this family sent the money to the saints in Semau Island to build a kindergarten so their kids could go to school and someday be educated. Like the Macedonians of old, they considered it a privilege "to share in the service to the saints."

### **"They gave themselves"**

The third thing I would say about this paragraph is that the Macedonians gave all of themselves. To Paul's surprise, "they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us," and then, by extension, to the project. There was a sense of vitality about their gift. They longed for a way to give themselves to a living God. They offered themselves to Paul and Titus and the other men in leadership, personally supporting, thanking, and praying for them. Finally, by extension, they gave their money so the people in Jerusalem could benefit. Isn't it our tendency too often to give our money and assume that that discharges our responsibility? We try to set aside a percentage and do it as quickly and painlessly as possible. Yet these Macedonians were just the opposite; they looked for a way to be personally involved as well.

One of the saddest things about contemporary "pop Christianity" is the fund-raising approach that many organizations have adopted. So often, highly sophisticated computer programs generate mailing lists or appeals that are intended to short-circuit the minds of people, grabbing at their emotions. There is an effort to spread the net as widely as possible so that even a small percentage of return will generate large sums. There's a horrible mentality behind all that. Instead of viewing the people who are giving as valuable in their own right, encouraging them to give their lives, to see the Lord at work, and to receive the blessing that comes from that, this mentality views them as sources of supply and little else. It's the farthest thing from what we read about in the scriptures. Paul saw something beautiful happen amongst the Macedonians, and their example was held up to others. They gave themselves first to the Lord; to his servants; and then they gave their money.

Our Lord told a parable of slaves being given an opportunity to invest what was their master's. The wise servants received his commendation afterward:

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share in your master's joy!"

To have made God's heart rejoice because of our choices is the greatest of all rewards. That's why Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, wants them to clearly see his friends from Macedonia and to understand three things: First, they had received a great deal; no one asked anything of them before it was clear how much they had been given in Christ. Second, they viewed giving as a privilege because they valued their brothers and sisters in Christ who were in need. And third, they gave all of themselves; their giving wasn't distant from their hearts, their relationships, or their knowledge of God. They were a good example.

### **The Corinthian example**

The Corinthians, on the other hand, are an example of a group of people who need correction. Paul writes this way because he wants the Corinthians to get out of their doldrums in these matters. Beginning in verse 6, we learn something about the Corinthians:

So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything-in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us-see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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.

And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

A year earlier, the Corinthians had heard about the opportunity to give to the poor in Jerusalem, and they were very enthusiastic. Their great verbal response stimulated other churches to care about the project, too. "You were the first . . . to desire to do so." So Paul advised them to set aside a little every week, according to how that week had gone, so it would accrue over time, and eventually he would come back and take this wonderful gift to Jerusalem. Their enthusiasm, however, leaped from one thing to the next, and they were much more willing to respond with a flash than to follow through with anything. As soon as Paul left their interest waned. He says, "You excel in everything [to a degree, that's part of the problem]-in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us." They respond quickly all the time, but he's concerned about a lack of depth in their response. So Paul gives them the good example of the Macedonian, and even more powerfully in verse 9, the good example of our Lord Jesus Christ, in order to awaken them to the shallowness of their response.

Jesus once said that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. It's appropriate and instructive for us to look at what we do in terms of giving. For those of us who have known the Lord for a time and understand that we are stewards, if stewardship consists of being motivated emotionally for the short term and then fading in responsibility (the Corinthian pattern), then we have some significant things to learn. Our decision to give on a regular basis can provide an opportunity over and over again for us to worship God, to remember that what we are giving is his, to thank the one who has died for us, and to recognize the privilege of his using our choices to do good to others. It can become the kind of thing where our discipleship grows precisely because we have an opportunity time and again to renew our commitment. But if we just give when our emotions are electrified or our ears tickled, very little growth takes place, very little worship, and we have diminished insight into who God is and what he has done.

### **Removing obstacles to giving**

Paul expected the Corinthians to give regularly because they had announced their intention to do so, and he is reminding them that their reluctance says something about the depth of their faith.

### **We are royal sons and daughters who have been given more than will ever be measured**

Let me finish the section in verses 12-15, which give us more insight into the nature of the Corinthians:

For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Paul is highlighting two other things that were true of the Corinthians. First, they were complaining that if they gave too much now, they might never benefit in return. But the clear word here is that God loves all his

children the same. If the day were to come when they were the poor church, then others would respond to care for them. Our Lord's intention was not to drain one group of people to create opulence for another, but that all of his children be cared for when they need it.

Some of you may know the long-time pillars of this church, Roy and Maxine Bradford. They have ministered in more ways to more children than nearly anyone else I can think of. Roy has had open-heart surgery within the last three weeks and is recovering. Maxine is in the hospital this week also with heart problems. So I called Chris Tucker, who is in charge of our Helping Hands ministry, to ask her to find somebody who could bring in some meals, help straighten up the house, and so forth. Her response was beautiful: She said, "I love things like that! I especially love helping people who have given so much." Her words recall this passage: People who have been generous with themselves will be treated generously when they need it. Paul is trying to help the Corinthians see that no one is taking advantage of them in this, that their heavenly Father knows their needs and his concern for balance can be trusted.

The second thing Paul is speaking to here is the Corinthians' embarrassment over their outspoken enthusiasm and lack of follow-through. They hadn't done what they were told to do, that is, to set aside some money every week. So now they aren't in a position to give the great gift that is expected of them. That's why in verse 12 the apostle is very gentle with them; he says the issue is what response they are going to make right now. "If the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he doesn't have." He wants them to become willing to say thank you, to let God lead them. He makes it clear he is giving advice, not a command. They have to decide what they are going to do in this matter. But the fact that they cannot meet expectations is not important to him. He is concerned about their heart-God doesn't need their money! If they will renew a sense of grateful response to God, Paul doesn't care how much they give.

### **Examining standards of measure**

Summing up, the Corinthians were embarrassed because they weren't going to have as much as they had indicated, so Paul is trying to relieve their embarrassment. And they were grumbling because they wondered if the system was going to be one-way and never work to their advantage, so he declares, "there will be equality." And Paul wants the sterling example of the Macedonians, who didn't think as much about the process or the details, who didn't calculate as much, but who were caught up in gratitude, to stand before the Corinthian Christians. Part of what he is trying to do is challenge them to consider whether their standards are what they ought to be. Their sense of what hardship is may need some adjusting.

For years it was said no one could ever run a mile in under four minutes. But then in the 1950's the Englishman Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile barrier, and now even high school students break it. Sub-four-minute miles have become routine. As long as one felt that it was asking too much to run a mile in under four minutes, no one ever did. But once the possibility arose that the standard needed changing. In the matter of giving we ask, "When is too much being demanded of me?"

Paul is trying to alert the Corinthians to a standard that is different from what they are comfortable with naturally. The Macedonians are one example, and the greater example is our Lord. The Corinthians felt financial strain at a threshold much lower than others whose example should challenge them.

Let me briefly note the role of Paul and Titus here. Paul is writing about the Macedonians, and he is writing to the Corinthians, but he is not promoting himself. We need to ask the leadership of Christian organizations whether they have the same selflessness as we see in Paul and Titus. They were not doing this for themselves. They went to significant effort to guard against even the possibility of impropriety or selfishness. Christian leaders who take advantage of people are some of the greatest enemies of real faith on many fronts today. Paul advises rather than commanding, faces them with the truth without rubbing it in, doesn't try to use guilt trips or anything else to get them to do what they were not themselves willing to do for Christ's sake. It's for Jesus' sake that they are to act, because of what he said and what he has offered them! That is clearly Paul's attitude here.

### **Riches in Christ**

Verse 9 is a powerful verse that is a good one to commit to memory. "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." From having absolute riches, as the sovereign of seen and unseen worlds before the incarnation, God, the Son, became a child in a manger, a criminal on a cross, and was executed without ever defending himself-all so that poor people like we, whose sin and folly were everywhere displayed, might become rich. We are royal sons and daughters who have been given more than will ever be measured. If anything ought to motivate us to delight in the process of serving God and what he's doing, it is the example of Jesus.

Look around at the people next to you before we close. The room is filled with rich people---not necessarily those who are rich monetarily, but those who are made rich by Christ. His poverty proceeded to our riches, and we are most truly the beneficiaries of the love of God.

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