

GIVING OUT OF GRATITUDE

SERIES: THE GRACE OF GIVING

By Doug Goins

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich...Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 8:9, 9:15)

As we observe Advent, we are inviting Jesus, Emmanuel, the long expected One, to forgive us, to deliver us, and to free us from the captivity to sin and fear. We are confessing Him as our hope, our rest, our strength, and our conciliation in difficulty. We are affirming that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's indescribable Christmas gift to us, identifies with all of our human struggle and suffering and weakness. He fulfills all of our longings and all of the desires of our hearts. He is joy incarnate and he gives us joy. Joy because we have eternal life. Joy because of our salvation from sin—salvation based on grace alone.

Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians are all about Christian giving—open-hearted, grateful, thoughtful, joyful generosity. The apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, and tells them that that's the only kind of giving that God puts any value on. In this 3-part series, we are first going to consider the *grateful* part of open-hearted generosity. Next we will look at the *thoughtful* part of open-hearted generosity (Discovery Paper #4748). And then, finally, we will look at the *joyful* part of giving (Discovery Paper #4749).

Paul had revealed earlier in this letter that the Corinthians had a problem with open-heartedness. Paul had said to them, "You are restrained in your affections" (2 Corinthians 6:12b). *The Message* paraphrased it, "The smallness you feel comes from within you." The Corinthians were Grinch-like, if you will. You see, I haven't just been studying the apostle Paul, but also Theodore Geissel, also known as Dr. Seuss, who wrote the classic children's story, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!* (1), and who, in my opinion, is a great modern-day theologian. Here's how that classic story begins:

Every *Who* down in *Who*-ville liked Christmas a lot. But the Grinch, who lived just North of *Who*-ville, did NOT! The Grinch *hated* Christmas! The whole Christmas season! Now, please don't ask why. No one quite knows the reason. It *could* be his head wasn't screwed on just right. It *could* be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight. But I think that the most likely reason of all may have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

To understand the historical context of Paul's concerns about Christian giving, we need to turn back to his first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul encourages the Greek Christians in this church to meet the needs of Christians in Palestine. Paul writes,

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come. And when I arrive, whomever you may approve, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me. (1 Corinthians 16:1-4)

At this time, Jerusalem is a very poor city. The economy has deteriorated significantly and there is an empire-wide famine. Christians in that city are suffering economically, primarily because of persecution and Paul had been asked by the other apostles to help raise support for the poor believers there.

For more than a year, all during his third missionary journey, Paul spent time soliciting a voluntary collection for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem. He had visited the provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and was now in Corinth, in a city in Achaia in the south of Greece.

In the passage above, Paul defines giving as a lifestyle. He calls the Corinthian Christians to join with all the churches everywhere to give to the work of the Kingdom of God. He tells them to give regularly and continually. He tells them that they are to give out of personal obedience, first to the Lord, then to the Word of God: “Let each one of you....” He tells them that their giving is not to be impulsive, but that they are to “put aside,”—to *save*, and to *thoughtfully* consider what they give.

He also speaks to them about giving proportionately—giving in proportion to how God has blessed them and prospered them. Paul is not speaking about a flat tax or tithe. Rather, they are to give back a *portion* of what God has entrusted them with. And notice that Paul doesn’t want the collection taken while he’s there because his presence would have too great an influence.

Finally, he tells them that they have the right to expect accountability, fiscal responsibility from the churches and from the Christian ministries that they choose to support. Of course, all of these principles apply to us today as well. We are to give in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

It seems, however, that between the writing of the first and second letters to the Corinthians the collection effort in Corinth fell apart. Even though initially there had been a great response, eagerness, and enthusiasm about the project, those feelings had waned. This may be because the church’s relationship with Paul had become strained, hard-heartedness had set in, maybe, like the Grinch, their hearts had become “two sizes too small” as well.

However, we then observed in chapter 7 of 2 Corinthians that Paul heard great news from Titus about the Corinthian’s positive response to his painful letter, and so now he wants to revive their interest in this collection for the saints. He wants to send their gift to Jerusalem along with all the other gifts collected from the Christian churches in the Mediterranean basin.

With that in mind, let’s now consider chapter 8 of 2 Corinthians. As already mentioned, Paul had spent time with the churches in Macedonia between the writing of the first and second letters, thus he begins his appeal to these Christians in Corinth by talking about the Macedonian believers in the northern part of Greece. Rather than beginning with a request to reinstate their collections, Paul begins with a model of sacrificial giving—a truly inspiring example of Christians living in Macedonia:

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

Paul had planted churches in the upper region of Macedonia during his second missionary journey—the churches at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. What Paul discovered on revisiting them is that they were motivated to give by the grace of God. Notice the word “grace.” The Greek noun, *charis*, is found ten times in chapters 8 and 9 of this letter. This same noun is used three times in verse 1 alone, describing God’s resources available to us that

empower us and enable us. It is also used in 9:8: “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed...” It used again in 9:14 where Paul is talking about the Jerusalem Christians and how they will respond to the Corinthians: “...While they also, by prayer on your behalf, yearn for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you.”

The Macedonian Christians understood that first and foremost they had received the grace of God. They gave out of gratitude for God’s goodness to them in Jesus Christ, for his gracious attitude toward them, and for his unconditional kindness shown toward them. God’s gracious heart was revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and in the message of salvation which reconciles us to God. New-Testament giving is always a response to what God has done in our lives. It is neither a religious duty, nor legislation. It is always seen as a privilege, and an opportunity for us to be financially gracious and to express the gratitude of our hearts for grace that has already been accomplished by what God has done and what he continues to do for us.

Now, there are sub-Christian motivations to giving. For instance, giving only for the tax write-off, to silence a guilty conscience, to gain a reputation for generosity, to gain favor with God, or because we are afraid of dying and facing him when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. That is not giving motivated by the grace of God. God is always concerned about motives—not what we are doing, but *why* we are doing it. And he is the only one who truly knows our hearts. But the Macedonian Christians were not affected by any of these wrong motives. Their hearts were moved by the grace of God, and verse 2 tells us that they gave in spite of horrible circumstances: “[You know brethren] that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.”

Generally, we would assume that an outpouring of generosity is going to come from churches that have great resources. But the Macedonian churches were physically afflicted, they were financially depleted, and Paul uses very strong language to describe how desperate their circumstances were. These Christians had been subject to severe persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. In addition to that, Roman occupation had destroyed the economy. They took possession of all the silver and gold mines that drove the economy. They put heavy taxation on copper and iron smelting. They cancelled the right to cut timber. Building had been a large industry for the Macedonians. In addition to that, the Romans had fought several wars on Macedonian soil and the result of all of this was extreme poverty. Literally, down to the depth of poverty, on the edge of starvation.

As I wrestled with this myself, I tried putting myself in the place of the Macedonians. I am a son of aging parents. I am a husband and a father with three children in college. I can think of many reasons not to give if I were in their place. I would want to hang on to my money and whatever assets or minimal resources I had left because, what if things got worse? You could even make a strong case for being irresponsible in giving away the only limited resources that you might have left.

But the Macedonian Christians, in experiencing the grace of God in the midst of their loss and limitation, sorrow and suffering, could identify with the severe suffering of their brothers and sisters in Christ in Palestine. The result, amazingly enough, was joy out of sorrow. Joy in giving liberally, generously.

How about the Who’s in Whoville? Do you remember what happened after the Grinch stole everything? He wiped them out, took their presents, their trees, their lights, their food, even the logs in their fireplaces, and then the Grinch went up to the top of Mt. Crumpet with Max (the dog). He can hardly wait for them to wake up on Christmas morning. He fully expect that...

the *Whos* down in *Who*-ville will all cry BOO-HOO! “That’s a noise,” grinned the Grinch, “that I simply MUST hear! So he paused. and the Grinch put his hand to his ear. And he *did* hear a sound rising over the snow. It started in low. Then it started to grow. But the sound wasn’t *sad*! Why, this sound sounded *merry*! It *couldn’t* be so! But it WAS merry! VERY!

He stared down at *Who-ville!* The Grinch popped his eyes! Then he shook! What he saw was a shocking surprise! [*They were standing hand in hand with big smiles on their faces.*] Every *Who* down in *Who-ville*, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all!

Out of the Macedonian's poverty, the grace of God accomplished in them an open-heartedness toward their own possessions. God made them wealthy in generosity when they had nothing else. Not only did they give generously, but they gave enthusiastically: "For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave..." (2 Corinthians 8:3). Paul didn't say how much they gave because that wasn't the point. There is no hint that this was impulsive or some reckless action on their part. From the language Paul uses, they determined what they could comfortably contribute, then trusted God. And then, somehow stretched that original commitment beyond what they thought they could do. Notice the last phrase in verse 3 which refers to something that is done freely, by choice. They were not pressured into giving.

In fact, Paul hadn't even asked them to give. He thought they were much too poor to be included. They had to come to him and begged him for the privilege of being part of the project. They considered involvement in the relief effort, "a favor" or "a privilege" as the NIV translates it. They wanted to be gracious because they had experienced grace. They also saw it as "a participation," as verse 4 tells us, meaning "fellowship," or *koinonia* in Greek. They weren't just giving money, but they were personally identifying with and participating with their brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem, their fellow sufferers.

Look, again, at the last phrase of verse 5: "But they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God." They gave out of their poverty because of the sincerity of their commitment to Christ as Lord. Their desire to serve Jesus was so great that they wouldn't allow their economic limitations to keep them from being involved in the work of His Kingdom.

You and I are called to the same radical commitment as the Macedonian believers. Objectively, belonging to Jesus means that "I am not my own for I am bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19c, 20a). All of my belongings, my money, including my house, my clothes, everything, belongs to Jesus. I want to be able to say out of an abundance of joy, "It really is all yours Lord. You can do whatever you want with it. Whatever you tell me to do with my resources I want to do."

I want to share with you a wonderful story from Kevin Coughlin's memoirs of his trip to the Philippines last April:

On the northern slopes of the Island of Mindoro, there is a squalidly poor tribe of people known as the Manyans. Ninety percent of them are believers in Jesus. Their huts require repair after every storm. They do not know about indoor plumbing. Their concept of electricity is fluorescent bulbs driven by batteries, and only the very wealthy one percent of the tribe have these. The children go naked until puberty, and even then their rags are pathetic. All the people I met have bad teeth, and their bellies are swollen from malnutrition. But their eyes and smiles are warm, sparkling, and genuinely joyful.

They held a pastor's conference in April, where I was taken by a national pastor/friend. There were 80 pastors who represented about 65 churches in the hills. The biggest church there has 75 people in it. At the conference everyone was squatting in their breech-clothes eating rice and fermented fish-heads with their fingers...

Here was the topic of intense discussion: How do we dig a little deeper to get enough pesos to send along with three Christian missionaries from the tribe, Yangunsi, Gunye, and Makario? We need

more resources to send these men to the lost souls on the island of Paloswan, so they can hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Based on this example, Paul goes on to challenge the Corinthian church:

Consequently we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also. I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. (2 Corinthians 8:6-8)

Paul challenges them in three specific areas. First, in verse 6, he wants them to finish what they started. Titus is the one who had recently carried this sorrowful letter to Corinth, and he had brought back this wonderful news to Paul of the Corinthian's repentance. Titus is now going to return to Corinth to deliver the second letter, and he is also going to give leadership to the completion of the collection.

I was thinking about how that dynamic—the need to be reminded about follow-through—affects missionaries. When they are home on furlough and raising support, oftentimes there is tremendous spontaneous, and sometimes emotional, response. People make commitments or pledges that they are going to support these missionaries on a regular basis, and then invariably, that support falls off, or it becomes sporadic. Interest and enthusiasm begins to wane unless the missionaries keep sending out prayer letters and pictures—the motivational literature to keep people “turned on.” Perhaps this is because the initial commitment was made out of some sort of superficial interest in the person, or project, or place, but it never was really grounded in the Lord.

This brings us to Paul's second challenge to the Corinthians. He wants them to do as well in their giving as they do in the rest of their Christian life: “Just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also” (2 Corinthians 8:7). Corinth was a vibrant and exciting church, rich in the gifts of the Spirit. But up to this point, open-hearted generosity of spirit, abounding in the gracious work of giving had not been one of their strong points. As they learn to give sacrificially, out of gratitude to God, gratitude for his grace, as they learn to abound in this gracious work of giving, it is going to lead them to increased spiritual maturity.

How balanced is your spiritual life? Are you as committed in your giving as you are to worship, or Bible study, or witnessing or prayer? If the margins of your Bible are crowded with study notes, but your checkbook is filled entirely with entries to Nordstrom's, Visa, Sears, and American Express, then chances are your life is out of balance.

Paul's third challenge to the Corinthians is found in verse 8: Giving is evidence of love. Paul says, “I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also.” He reminds them that the Macedonian Christians gave because of their genuine love for the Lord and for his church, not because of any perceived pressure to do so. He gently exhorts the Corinthians to embrace true, sincere giving; giving that is a manifestation of a heart that has been deeply touched by the love of God, the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Statistics today tell us that there really is little loving sacrifice in most Christian giving. At Christmastime, most of us are going to spend more on presents for ourselves and our families than we will give to the Lord and to the work of his Kingdom. It has been estimated that the personal budget of most church-goers for sporting events far exceeds gifts to the work of Christ.

In verse 9, we see Paul's deep concern that their "fire" for those in need is going out and he wants to encourage them to rekindle a love that has grown cold. To do this, he fans the flame with a picture of Jesus:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

In Jesus, Paul saw the most beautiful example of enthusiasm in giving—a powerful demonstration of his love—a love for the Father, and a love for us.

There are three important phrases in this verse. First, Jesus' giving of himself was motivated by grace: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." Jesus' love relationship with his heavenly Father manifested itself in total dependence on the gracious resources of his Father. Jesus said that he did nothing apart from the Father. The way Jesus lived his life revealed complete trust in God's activity, in God's provision, in God's care, and in God's grace. And his giving was based on that certainty. Sacrificial giving is the very essence of God's grace at work and Paul makes his appeal on the basis of that grace.

The second phrase of verse 9 tells us that Jesus' giving was accomplished through self-sacrifice: "You know that though he was rich, yet for your sake He became poor." What struck me this week was a beautiful, subtle contrast. Though the Macedonian Christians were impoverished, they gave like they were rich. Though Jesus was rich, he lived a life of impoverishment. Jesus was the wealthiest person in the entire universe. It was all his. It was deeded to him by his Father, yet he left it all behind. What Paul is describing here is the incarnation. Jesus gave up the glory of heaven to walk where we walk and to stand where we stand and to feel what we feel and to share our human frailty. He experienced racial hatred, prejudice, and injustice. The apostle Paul wrote to another of the poor churches in Macedonia, and this is what he said about Jesus in that letter:

...Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

There was a point to it. That's the third phrase in this verse: Jesus' giving resulted in our spiritual enrichment so that we, through his poverty, might become rich. On the cross, he paid for our wickedness and he died in our place so that we could have eternal life. True Christian giving finds its meaning only when others benefit from it, and when they are made rich by it. Have you ever thought about how rich you are in Jesus?

While we were visiting Lahore, Pakistan this past October, we were basically sequestered in the hotel most of the time, except for those times when we were actually participating in some scheduled event. During that week, I spent a lot of time watching CNN and the BBC International news channels on television. I was intrigued as I watched our world through that grid—a world of terrorism, Middle Eastern violence, famine, hunger, slavery, warfare, and a chaotic world economy. There were times when I felt homesick, vulnerable, and toward the end of the week I was even experiencing "cabin fever." I contemplated what it would be like to live through all of this without the Lord Jesus.

Can you imagine living in this chaotic world without him? Living without His forgiveness, his joy, his peace, his presence, and his power that is always available to us? I am so grateful for the awareness I gained while in Pakistan of the incredible enrichment of Christ in my life.

Jesus himself said, "Freely you received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). We need to ask ourselves: "Does my giving look like the Macedonian Christians who followed Jesus' example. Is my lifestyle defined by open-hearted, generous, grateful, thoughtful, joyful giving? Is it controlled by how much I have or how little I have? Am I

Grinch-like, with a heart two sizes too small? Am I clutching my affluence to myself, while my brothers and sisters are in need? Do I give grudgingly? Am I giving resentfully out of restricted affections?

In chapter 6, Paul appealed to the Corinthians saying, “Open wide your hearts.” It *is* possible for God to expand our hearts. Even the Grinch experienced a change of heart:

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling: “How *could* it be so? It came without ribbons! It came without tags! It came without packages, boxes or bags!” And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore. *Then* the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before! “Maybe Christmas,” he thought, “*doesn’t* come from a store. Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!”

And what happened then...? Well...in *Who*-ville they say that the Grinch’s small heart grew three sizes that day!

As followers of Jesus Christ our hearts can be expanded at least two or three sizes if we are willing to enter into the mystery of the incarnation. We can become grateful people of open-hearted generosity, but we’ve got to be willing to deal honestly with Jesus’ sacrificial love for us. We have got to allow him to express his gracious life through us.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich...Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

NOTE:

(1) Theodor Seuss Geisel, *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!* T&M © 1957, renewed 1985 by Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. Published by Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

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