

Grace That Grows Into Generosity

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[0 : 00] The sanctuary felt electrified, shot through with expectation and enthusiasm. The preacher had the people in the palm of his hand. Let the church walk, he yelled.

Amen, pastor, the people responded. Let the church walk. Let the church run, he yelled. Amen, pastor, the people responded. Let the church run. Let the church fly, he screamed.

Amen, pastor, the people screamed back. Let the church fly. And the pastor leaned over the pulpit and said, Now it's going to take a little bit more money to make the church fly.

Dead silence. Until one of the elders, sitting in the back row, stood up and said, Let the church walk, pastor, just let it walk. Please open your Bibles now to a text of Scripture, which I think, if it grabs us, can help the church fly.

The text is 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1-9, and chapter 9, verses 6-15. 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1-9, and chapter 9, verses 6-15.

[1 : 13] It's a wonderfully liberating text. And I'm going to be reading it from the New International Version. Hear the Word of God. Now, brothers and sisters, 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.

So we urge 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'm 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 the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich.

[2 : 35] Then chapter 9, verse 6. Remember this. Whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

Each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

As it is written, He says, Gathered abroad His gifts to the poor, His righteousness endures forever. Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed, and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

You will be made rich in every way, so that you can be generous on every occasion. And through us, your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people, but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

[3 : 49] And in their prayers for you, their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing grace of God given to you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift.

Spirit of the living God, we believe that you inspired the Apostle Paul to write these words many years ago now. And we pray that in your mercy and grace you would take these words off the page and you would cause them to come alive in our minds and in our hearts as never before.

For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Let me briefly fill you in on the historical context of this stewardship appeal by the Apostle Paul.

It's the late 40s of the first century. It's during the reign of the Emperor Claudius. During that time, there were a number of terrible droughts and bad harvests. Famine developed in a number of areas around the Mediterranean Sea.

And one of the most severely affected areas was Palestine and especially immediately around the city of Jerusalem. In response to the need for food in the Jerusalem churches, the church in Antioch, a Gentile church, organized a hunger relief fund.

[5 : 06] By the way, it's in Antioch that the disciples of Jesus are first called Christians. The Antioch church then selects two people who will bring these funds to Jerusalem. They are Barnabas, whose name means son of compassion, and Paul.

And when we read the rest of the record of Paul's life, we see that wherever Paul went, he was always appealing to these churches to give to this hunger relief fund. At one point, the need became particularly acute.

And having heard of the need, the believers in Corinth promised to be ready to give. But after a few months, they began to waver on this promise.

They, too, were facing very tight economic times. And so they began to make noise about not being able to give quite as much as they had promised. So Paul writes to them.

He appeals to them to be generous, even in their hard times, to this ministry to the Jerusalem churches. And his appeal is what we have in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Sometime soon, you need to take a few moments and just read through all of those two chapters and study them.

[6 : 12] Paul uses a number of very interesting tactics here. For instance, he begins by telling the Corinthians how generous the Macedonians are.

And he reminds them that the Macedonians are much poorer than the Corinthians. It is as though Paul were saying, Now, you don't want to be outshone by those who are poorer than you, do you? It's like me reporting the fact that, on average, those who make \$100,000 a year give 2.2% to the church and other charities, whereas those who make \$10,000 a year give 5.5%.

Paul then goes on to tell the Corinthians that he has been bragging to the Macedonians about how much the Corinthians are going to give. He says in chapter 9, verses 2 and 4, I have been boasting about your eagerness to help, telling them that since last year you're ready to give, and your enthusiasm has stirred up them.

Now, if any Macedonians were to come with me and find you unprepared, we, not to say you, would be ashamed of not giving. I hope you don't mind that I told the pastors of the Presbytery of Santa Barbara yesterday that in the midst of this recession, GPC was prepared to triple its budget for family ministries.

[7 : 46] And I don't want to be embarrassed if I go back there next year and see. Now, as effective as those tactics might be, the real basis for the appeal lies elsewhere at a much deeper level.

In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the apostle of grace, as he is called, lays a theological foundation for why the Corinthians should go on being generous in hard times.

And from these two chapters, I think we can extract three principles which can help us be faithful stewards of the grace God has given to us. The first principle we can express like this.

Giving is the only way life grows. Giving is the only way life grows. Paul asked the Corinthians to take another look at the structure of creation.

He asked them, what do you see there? Answer? Growth takes place only where there is giving. Chapter 9, verse 6. Remember this, he says, whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly.

[9 : 01] Whoever sows generously will also reap generously. The richness of a farmer's harvest is dependent on many factors, but the critical factor is the extent of the farmer's sowing of seed.

The richness of our lives depends on a number of factors, but the most critical factor is the extent of the giving of ourselves. Sow sparingly, reap sparingly.

Sow generously, reap generously. Perhaps the most popular expression of this principle is found in Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol.

The leading character, as you know, is Mr. Scrooge. Mr. Scrooge has much, keeps much, clings to much. Yet he is the unhappiest, he is the emptiest, he is the poorest of characters in the play.

It is when he dares to give to Tiny Tim that Scrooge finally begins to live. That's because giving is the only way life grows.

[10:10] The most challenging form of this principle, of course, is found on the lips of the one who lived it most perfectly. Jesus says, those who would come after me must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow me.

If they want to save their lives, they must lose them. If they lose their lives, they will save them. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Life grows only by giving. Farmers reap to the degree that they sow.

Sow little, reap little. Sow much, reap much. Now, in his stewardship appeal, Paul is careful to say that what a person sows is a matter of the heart.

That is, what a person sows is to be determined in the presence of the living God and before the living God. Giving, especially that kind that causes life to grow, cannot be legislated.

[11:10] Each of us must determine before God what sowing sparingly and generously involves. For some people, giving the basic tithe, the first 10% of our income is sowing generously.

Indeed, for those on small fixed incomes, giving the tithe is sowing sacrificially. But for others, giving the basic tithe, the first 10% of the income is sowing sparingly.

Indeed, for some of us, giving 20% or 30% is sowing sparingly. It's a matter of the heart.

It all depends upon how much we want to grow. Sow sparingly, reap sparingly. Sow generously, reap generously. What do we reap? Well, we do not necessarily reap the same that we sow.

Sow more money to the gospel, and we might not necessarily reap a whole lot more money. Sow more time to the gospel, and we may not necessarily reap a whole lot more time, but we will reap authentic life.

[12:19] I like the way one person put it, the real rewards of goodness are in the Spirit. Love's true return is not even the love of others. Love's true return is the increased capacity to love.

The greatest reward of giving generously is the increased capacity to be generous, and to be generous with joy. As Paul says, what pleases God most is a cheerful giver.

Principle one, giving is the only way life grows. The second principle addresses the fear we have of the first. What do I mean?

Well, the Corinthians seem to fear that if they were to sow abundantly, they would be left impoverished. Is that not our fear?

When we hear the call to be generous with our wealth and time and skills, we are afraid that if we give generously of our time, we will lack the time that we need for ourselves.

[13:23] Right? We are afraid that if we give generously of our resources to advance the gospel and to feed the poor, we ourselves will be poor. A research biologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has argued that America cannot do anything more for the third world.

He writes, Paul speaks directly to this fear in the second principle, and it can be expressed like this. Giving is funded by the generosity of God. Giving is funded by the generosity of God. Listen again to those powerful words in chapter 9, verses 8 to 11.

I'm tempted to read these about five times. Chapter 9, verses 8 to 11. God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things, at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase the store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.

[14:44] Wow. Those sentences just ooze with the generosity of God. For instance, the word provide in verse 8 literally means make abound.

Make more than enough. Be present in abundance. Overflow. So J.B. Phillips translates 2 Corinthians 9, 8 this way. God can give you more than you can ever need so that you can always have sufficient for yourselves and enough left over to give to every good cause.

Do you believe that? The verb supplies in verse 10, in the Greek is the word choreo, from which we get the English word choreography. In classical Greek, it meant to lead a chorus, and it also meant to pay the expenses to train the chorus.

A man would so much want to have this play put on that he would make sure that it happened by funding the whole enterprise. Paul is telling the Corinthians, and he's telling us, that there is no reason to be afraid of being generous.

The living God is putting on a play, and the title of the play is, Life Only Grows by Giving, and God is funding all the expenses for the play.

[16:08] God will super-provide those who are willing to risk giving so that they might super-provide for the needs of others. Do you believe that?

It's hard to believe, isn't it? It's hard to believe, especially when the bills keep piling up. But it is the promise of God. It seems to go contrary to so many people's experiences.

We spend time, we spend money, and the money doesn't increase, and the time doesn't increase. Could it be because when all is said and done, it's because we're actually giving to ourselves?

The promise God will give you more than you need is for those who spend their time and money for others for Christ's sake.

The generous God funds the generosity of the generous. So that, says Paul. Notice that in verse 9, 8, sorry.

[17:09] So that, so that. God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

So that. This little so that is the corrective to the spin which the so-called health and wealth gospel puts on these verses. God does prosper His people, but God prospers His people not so they can have more, but so that they can be and give more.

I like the way my friend John Piper puts it in his book, *Desiring God*. Listen to these words. God increases our yield so that by giving, we can prove that our yield is not our God.

Say that again. God increases our yield so that by giving, we can prove that the yield is not our God. God does not prosper a person's business so that he can move up to the next level of luxury in automobiles.

God prospers a business so that 17,000 unreached people groups can hear the gospel. God prospers a business so that 12% of the world's population can move a step back from the precipice of starvation.

[18:24] So that. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing for the world for whom Christ died. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing for the world. Dr. Piper goes on to say this.

The issue is not how much a person makes. Big industry, big salaries are a fact of time. They are not necessarily evil. The evil is being deceived into thinking that a \$100,000 salary must be accompanied by a \$100,000 lifestyle.

Then he writes this. Listen carefully. God has made us to be conduits of His grace. Conduits of His grace. The danger is in thinking that the conduit should be lined with gold.

It need not be lined with gold. Copper will do. So that. God keeps on being generous to the generous so that the generous can keep on being generous.

Principle two. Giving is funded by the generosity of God. We can never deplete the wellsprings of God's grace.

[19:29] The fear of losing by giving has no basis in reality. In reality as it is with the living God. Thus, Annie Johnson Flint can sing.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance, when our strength has failed, ere the day is half done, when we reach the end of our hoarded resources, our Father's full giving has only begun.

His love has no limit. His grace has no measure. His power has no boundary, no one unto men. For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again.

There's a third principle. And we can express it like this. Giving reveals that we have been grabbed by the gospel. Giving reveals that we've been grabbed by the gospel.

Listen carefully to chapter 9, verses 12 through 14. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people, but is also overflowing with many expressions of thanks to God.

[20:34] Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ. And in their prayers for you, their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing grace God has given you.

Paul is telling the Corinthians that the proof that they have indeed experienced the gospel is their generosity. The gospel breaks the fearful grip of greed and frees us for generosity.

What is the gospel? Paul summarizes it in chapter 8, verse 9. For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that, so that, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich.

Jesus risks the loss of it all. He risks it all. He risks it all for us who are very poor, so that we might become very wealthy. He sets aside all of His comfortable status as God.

He accepts the hardship and limits of our humanity. And He does it all so that we can be pardoned and healed and reconciled and brought into the family.

[21 : 48] And Paul is saying that to the degree that we have experienced this grace, we will give ourselves away. You remember that dinner party that Jesus had with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector?

Remember how after dinner, Jesus said, Today salvation has come to this house. What made Jesus say that? What was the objective sign that salvation had indeed come to that house? Who told Zacchaeus to do this? Who told Zacchaeus to take his checkbook out and write half of the balance and give it to the poor? Who told Zacchaeus to do it? Nobody told him to do it.

That's the point. That's the natural response of grace. When grace breaks in, the grip of greed is broken. G. Campbell Morgan put it this way, Zacchaeus went into that dinner mastered by the passion to get.

He came out of that dinner swept by the compassion to give. Paul begins his appeal to the Corinthians with amazing words. Chapter 8, verse 1.

[23 : 04] Now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace God has given the Macedonians. Okay, Paul, tell us about it. Tell us about this grace God gave the Macedonians.

Verse 2. Out of much tribulation, 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 the service of the saints. Imagine that. The poor believers begging for the opportunity to give.

I saw it in the Philippines. I saw it in China. Poor churches eager to give. But that's what grace does. Grace makes grace-filled people.

And grace, by its very nature, grows into generosity. Principle 1. Giving is the only way to grow.

[24 : 07] We reap to the degree that we sow. Principle 2. Giving is funded by the generosity of God. We cannot lose. We cannot lose.

Principle 3. Giving reveals that we've been grabbed by the gospel. Grace melts the fearful heart and opens the clutched hands. So what do we do today?

How are we to respond to this word which we have heard? By going back to square one. By going back to God's gift.

To Jesus. Whom Paul calls the indescribable gift. Literally that word is the not yet fully drawn out gift.

We will never plumb the depths of God's generosity in Jesus Christ. Never. For the gospel says that the redeemer and creator spends his time spending it for you and me.

[25 : 11] All we can do is what Paul says the Macedonians did. They gave themselves first to the Lord. They gave themselves to the Lord. That is the only appropriate response to the God who lives by giving.

And it is that response that makes the church fly. Here I am, Lord. Your grace has broken through the fear. You've won me.

I'm yours. And therefore, so is everything else you've given me. Use it for your purposes in the world. Let the church walk.

Amen, Pastor. Let the church walk. Let the church run. Amen, Pastor. Let the church run. Let the church fly.