

The Grace of Giving

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] When I was a boy, my father used to say to me that there were two things I should never speak! about politics and religion. I've already broken one of them in that I'm a minister whose job it is, of course, to talk about religion. I've never yet fallen foul of the second talking about politics, although there are times I've been severely, severely tempted. But in the ministry, the hardest thing for a minister to talk about often is money. The minister talking about money is viewed as being fairly self-serving. People in the pew perhaps think, oh, he's angling for a pay rise. Well, in the free church, that can't be true because all ministers are paid the same. So, I'm paid exactly the same as every other minister, and that's a good thing. While still being myself a little bit shy about speaking about money from the pulpit, the advantage of a continual exposition of Scripture is that when you come across chapters like 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, you simply have to talk about money.

Thankfully, the Apostle Paul didn't share my shyness when it comes to talking about finances. He's not shy because he knows that if a Christian is wholly devoted to Christ, then that devotion to Christ is demonstrated in the whole of life, including the wallet in his back pocket.

But of course, Paul is not so precise as to present balance sheets and financial projections. Rather, as he does in all his writings, he grounds his appeal for the practical expression of our faith in the gospel. To put it another way, before asking us to do something for God, he shows what God has done for us, and that what we do for Him is a response to all He's done for us.

And that's why before we go into the details of the chapter itself, we want to focus on verse 9, and some of the most astonishing statements of the gospel anywhere in the New Testament.

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. That's 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9.

[2 : 30] In many ways we could let this statement stand on its own. It would provide all the motivation necessary to give generously for the sake of Christ and His kingdom in this church. But we cannot do this.

We have to enter into the deepest grace of Christ toward us, if for nothing else than to reinforce to us all the beauty of the gospel we believe and the sheer grace of the Christ we worship.

Paul locates here our entire salvation in the realm of the grace of Christ. He does not say, for you know the duty of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says, you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

By definition, we know that grace is not deserved. Christ did not become poor for us because we deserved it, because we'd earned it, or because we'd merited it. So, there's a beggar on the street outside.

He's not a poor unfortunate who's fallen on hard times. He has made himself poor by a series of bad decisions in life. He has never worked, and from an early age he started drinking, and from then his alcoholism escalated into drug consumption. He's been in and out of rehab. He has had countless opportunities to change his life, but he's nothing but a waster. He's got a wife and a children somewhere, although he had an extra marital affair which put an end to his marriage. He has never done a day's work in his life, but he wants me to put my hand in my pocket just so he can buy more drugs.

[4 : 19] Now, of course, not all beggars are like that, but this one is. One day a man comes up to him, and into his little paper cup places a million pounds in gold. The man says to the beggar, this is all I have in the world, but you can have it. Now, that's grace. What did that waster of a beggar, what had he done to deserve such generosity? That in an instant he should go from being the poorest man in Glasgow to one of the richest. That's grace, what they used to call gifts received at Christ's expense. In some ways, 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9 is the equivalent of Paul's Christ hymn of Philippians 2. Remember what it says of Christ, though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God something to be held on to, grasped onto. He made himself nothing.

The riches of Christ consisted in him possessing all the privileges and status of God, the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable blessedness, peace, and joy of the divine Trinity. But for us he gave it up.

For our sakes he became poor. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. He willingly subjected himself to all the sufferings common to the human condition. Yes, even the loneliness and stress of Gethsemane.

He became the definition of poverty. Can there be any other description of what happened upon the cross other than he was forsaken by the Father with whom he had eternally, infinitely, and unchangeably enjoyed the deepest of loving communions? It's not just that he lost that awareness, but that the Father positively turned away his face from his Son and subjected him to the devastating curse of sin and guilt.

Christ became sin for us. He became the definition of poverty for our sakes. He did it for our sakes so that we, through his poverty, might become rich. He willingly subjected himself to the curse of the Father's punishment so that we might partake of a Father's infinite, eternal, and unchangeable joy, peace, and blessedness. We, by Christ's poverty, have been enriched beyond our wildest imaginings. We have gifts the world cannot give, gifts of Christ's grace, forgiveness of all our sins, a sure and certain hope of eternal life, the lifelong indwelling of the Godhead within us by the Holy Spirit. The Christian might be financially poor, but she is richer than the richest person in the world who is not a Christian. She has riches his money cannot buy. She has Christ as her Savior and Lord, and her future is not dictated by the shifting patterns of the stock market or her own physical health. What Christ once had in the presence of his Father before he became incarnate of the Virgin

[7 : 45] Mary, he graciously gives to us, we, the sinful, dirty, waste, wasters, beggars, who by our own choices had turned away from God and deserved his judgment. And prompted by anything except his love for us, Christ emptied himself to fill us with the unnumbered blessings and riches of his glory. This is grace, this is extravagant grace given to the undeserving, without money, without price, but at the greatest of costs to the giver. It wasn't a cost given grudgingly as if Christ had to be cajoled or persuaded to give himself for us. Rather, in the eternal counsel of the Trinity, Christ willingly volunteered to do this for us because of the vastness of God's love for us. And how much does it cost us to become rich at Christ's expense? Nothing. We trust in him. We have faith in him. We believe in him. That's it. It costs us nothing to benefit from him from whom it cost everything. This isn't a scam. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But by grace we are saved through faith, and even the faith with which we believe is a faith which is a gift of God. So, this is the background to everything else we want to say about the gift, the grace of giving.

Look, everything that's needful. Christ's gospel is the patterning motive for our giving. His gift to us comes way before our gift to him. This is all we need to transform the duty we have to give to Christ into the most delightful grace. Giving to him becomes joyful, not dutiful.

So, having based everything, therefore, on theology of the gospel, which is what Paul always does in all his letters, we move on to consider this chapter under two headings. First, from verse 1 to 15, faithful service, and second, from verse 16 to 24, faithful stewardship. But remember, overarching everything I'm going to say tonight is verse 9. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. First of all then, faithful service from verse 1 to 15, faithful service. There's just so much wholesome teaching in this section that I almost feel as if I'm cheating you by skimming my way through it.

Paul begins by drawing the attention of the Corinthian church to the churches of Macedonia. Now, these were the churches of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. These churches had been under great pressure.

[11 : 02] Even though they were extremely poor, their joy in Christ had been expressed by a wealth of generosity. Literally, they begged the apostle to do them a favor by allowing them to contribute to the relief of the saints. We go to verse 5. And this not as we expected, they gave themselves first to the Lord, and then by the will of God to us. They gave themselves first to the Lord. That's the key phrase. The Lord here, as Paul uses the word in other places, refers to Christ. They gave themselves first to Christ. If a person's heart is first given over to Christ, then his wallet is completely given over also. If any of us here are struggling to understand why we should give to the

work of Christ in this church or outside, we have to explore our hearts and ask, is my heart fully devoted to

Christ in the first place? You see, Paul's immediately moved the goalposts of giving from finance to spirituality. To give to the work of the Lord is not a matter of pounds and pence, but a matter of devotion to Christ, who for our sakes became poor so that through his poverty we become rich. Paul isn't after their money as much as he's after their hearts, because that's where the fountain of life resides and decisions are made. You'll notice in verse 6 and 7 that on two occasions, Paul uses the expression act of grace to describe the way in which the Macedonian churches have been so desperate to give generously. This act of grace, the end of verse 6, this act of grace, end of verse 7. In verse 6, we learn that this was one of Titus' objectives when he would be sent to Corinth again by Paul to stir up within the Corinthians this spiritual attitude of giving. Again, though, we want to focus on Paul's words in verse 7. As you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in all earnestness, and in our love for you, see that you excel in this act of grace also. For Paul, giving financially and otherwise was an act of grace. It gives us an outlet for expressing our gratitude to Christ. We express that gratitude in many ways, in faith, in knowledge, in earnestness. Now we have another area in which to express our gratitude to Christ for our salvation, in our giving. Giving to Christ is a grace. It's not a duty. It's one way in which we can express our gratitude to Jesus by faithfully serving Him. From verse 8, we also learn that giving is a proof that our love for Christ that our love for Christ is genuine and authentic.

To go back to an earlier point, Paul wants their hearts more than their money. He wants them, he wants to see them expressing their gratitude for salvation. In verse 12, he says, if the readiness is there, it's acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. Paul was aware that some of the members of the church in Corinth were poor and some of them were rich. He didn't expect those who were poor to give as much as those who were rich. It's the readiness of heart which is the crucial matter. So, someone who earns one pound a day gives 10 pence a day to the Lord's work because, you know, the scriptural command is that we should at least tithe to the work of the Lord. And that leaves them 90 pence to live on for that day.

[15 : 21] Someone earning 100 pound a day gives 10 pound a day to the Lord's work, and that gives them 90 pounds a day to live on. What is the greater gift, 10 pence or 10 pounds? Well, for Paul, it doesn't really matter, although he'd probably lean to the person earning one pound a day. What matters is the readiness, the heart attitude of the person who is giving. That doesn't absolve us from giving as much as we can. If anything, it's a more testing standard because it makes our giving an issue of the heart in relation to God. There are many other things we could say from this passage. The priority of giving to churches which are incredibly poor because in years to come, these poor churches which have grown because of our generosity will supply our needs. We'll look at this next week. I know it's self-serving to say, but what strikes me from this passage is that many of these principles Paul is setting forth form the basis of Presbyterianism, one of the core principles of which is that the strong help the weak. We should not begrudge helping those weaker than us. Rather, it's a grace given us by

Christ, a way of expressing our gratitude for salvation by caring for Christ's flock, whatever they are. So, you see, these first 15 verses are all focused on the heart more than the wallet. If the heart is open to Christ, the wallet will be open to Christ also. But it's the attitude of the heart which is the primary key issue. When it comes to my giving to this church and to the work of the gospel of the Lord, have we first given ourselves to Christ? It's that gracious attitude which renders our giving faithful service and an act of grace. So, faithful service, that's the first point.

And then secondly, from verse 16 through 24, faithful stewardship, faithful stewardship. Well, the minute we hear about money in the church, our minds are instantly suspicious.

What are they going to do with my money, we ask. And you know, the church at large hasn't always had a great reputation in this regard. Even today, we may ask the same question, if I up my giving to this church and start giving a tenth of my money to this church, what will they do with it?

When people give money to the church, the responsibility to steward that money correctly and faithfully is entirely as spiritual as the giving of the money itself. Those whose responsibility it is to manage and steward the church's money must take their responsibilities seriously and be faithful stewards. In these verses, Paul talks about how he's going to send Titus, along with two other fellow workers, to Corinth to collect their offerings. Titus would seem to be the leader of this delegation.

[18 : 49] Titus was one of Paul's acolytes, his evangelists. The Titus with whom the Corinthians had already forged a connection through an earlier visit. Now, Paul can't speak highly enough of this young man, Titus.

Titus seems to have volunteered for this position because he was eager to see how the Lord was working in the hearts of the Corinthians. Along with Titus in verse 18, Paul sent someone he describes in this way, the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel.

What a wonderful designation. The brother who's famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. I have little doubt that this is a reference to Apollos, who was the greatest preacher of the early church. Perhaps Apollos had little skill in administration, but that was not his role in the journey. He was going to preach the gospel, talking about the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by this, to stir up the hearts of the Corinthians to give. Along with Titus and Apollos, Paul is sending, in verse 22, our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who was now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. Now, we don't know who this person was, but he seems to have been a very practical person, who over time had shown himself faithful in everything he'd been asked to do. I know people like this, people who work in the background.

You don't know their names. Perhaps they can't preach, but they're brilliant at practical things and doing what they're asked to do. I hope he will never listen to this online.

Many years ago, you'll remember this, Walter, myself and Walter were traveling from Savannah, Georgia to Jackson, Mississippi to take part in the Twin Lakes Conference. We were traveling in one of these big American Winnebago things with the ministers from our sister church in IPC Savannah.

[20 : 57] Somewhere in Backwater, Alabama, the senior pastor of IPC, Terry Johnson, emerged from the Winnebago toilet and admitted that he'd blocked it. Now, Terry is a fantastic preacher. He's a great minister, but he's got absolutely no common sense at all. In a flash, one of the deacons whose name I can't even remember said, I'll deal with it. And so he did.

Later, somewhere in northeast Mississippi, this big Winnebago started making funny noises and we stopped for a while. And that same nameless deacon opened the hood of the Winnebago, got his hands dirty by fiddling with some rubber tubes and some wires, and we were ready to go again. Without that deacon, we'd have been stuck and grounded in a town with a remarkably American name of Chunky Mississippi.

Every faithful ministry needs people like that deacon who will faithfully unblock toilets and wiggle about under the hood of Winnebago's to make sure that everything's fixed and working properly. He didn't draw any attention to himself. Do you remember his name, Walter? I can't remember his name. He went as a missionary to the Philippines after that, him and his wife. He didn't draw any attention to himself. He quietly saw his role in life as unblocking toilets for men with no common sense and fixing engines for a wagon full of ministers.

So you've got these three men sent to Corinth by Paul to collect their offerings. Paul's doing everything he can, you see, to ensure that whatever the Corinthians gave was faithfully handed to those who needed it most. And he's doing this for two reasons. First, as we read in verse 19, for the glory of Christ. And secondly, as we read in verse 21, to be honorable both in the sight of Christ and at the sight of men. There must be no dubiety, there must be no dodginess, nothing's to be done in secret so that no accusations of impropriety could be directed toward them at all, or you've skimmed 10% off the top. If God's people are faithful enough to give, God's people, God's servants, God's servants must be faithful enough to steward their gifts. If they have been motivated by grace to give, God's servants must be motivated by that same grace to steward. Everything must be done decently in an order with no loose paper trails or dubiety of any kind at all.

[23 : 49] Maybe that's, I mean, to be challenged in this, I'm probably wrong because I've got about as little common sense as Terry Johnson, but perhaps that's one benefit of the church being subject to the civil law. In particular, having to register with the Scottish Charities Regulator, it forces us to be completely transparent with how the church stewards the Lord's money. Maybe it's a British thing, maybe it's a Scottish thing, we just don't like to talk about money. For right or for wrong, we steer clear of these kind of discussions. For my part, I think discretion is wise. We support OMF, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. All of their missionaries rely upon financial support from churches, but they never appeal for it directly. Never once did we hear Katrina say, I'm a thousand pounds

short of my target. Rather, the hearts of Christians are moved to support their work by the gospel value they place upon it. OMF's founder, James Hudson Taylor, famously said, God's work done in God's way will never lack

God's supply. If you're taking notes, write that down and put it into your heart and into your mind. God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply.

What's more important than talking about money from the pulpit is talking about the heart from the pulpit. If the hearts of God's people are moved by the grace of Christ, the money will come for whatever aspect of God's work. Whatever aspect of God's work needs it. And if the money doesn't come, then maybe God's telling us that we don't need to do it in the first place.

Better that the preacher sticks close to the gospel of Christ and let the Holy Spirit do his convicting work in the hearts of his hearers. Just before Christmas, many of us here stood outside Marks and Spencers in the retail park opposite the church here, singing carols and inviting people to our Christmas carol service.

And one of the carols we sang was, In the Bleak Midwinter. I don't really like In the Bleak Midwinter. Who knows whether it was in the bleak Midwinter Christ was really born. However, I was deeply convicted by the last verse of that carol. Words which I want to finish with and leave in our hearts to think through when it comes to what we give to the work of the gospel.

[26 : 32] What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give him? Give my heart.