

Therefore Be Generous

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 22nd of August 2004. The preacher is Tim Johnson.

His sermon is entitled, Therefore Be Generous, and is based on 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1-15.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word does last. We pray that as we hear it this morning, that we listen to what it has to say, but more importantly, that by your Holy Spirit, we would be changed by what we hear.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Having a look at 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1-15 this morning.

So if you'd like to have that open in front of you, that would be very helpful. In the early years of the Christian church, when the gospel was first taken into Europe, a large number of the tribes turned to Christ.

[1 : 07] This particularly happened amongst the Franks. Many of them became Christians and were baptised together in local rivers. But as they were dipped under the water, many of them would hold their right arms out of the water.

They'd be plunged into the water, but they'd hold their right arms in the air. And they did this so that they could claim that although they had been baptised into Christ, that their right arm hadn't, so that they could feel justified in swinging their swords ferociously in battle, because that arm hadn't been baptised with the rest of them.

Well, it's been suggested that the modern equivalent is us allowing ourselves to be plunged under the water, but holding our wallets out of the water so that they remain dry.

But when we hear a story like that, we immediately know how incongruous it sounds. We know it at least in our heads, but we need to ask ourselves, is it matched in our actions?

That's the challenge to us as we look at 2 Corinthians chapter 8 this morning. We need to ask ourselves, are we who have experienced God's grace in our lives, giving graciously to others?

[2 : 25] That's our challenge this morning. Well, a little bit of background might be helpful for us as we look at 2 Corinthians 8. What is happening is that the Apostle Paul is collecting money amongst the Gentile churches so that he can take that money to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

These Jewish Christians are quite poverty stricken, and so he's collecting up money amongst the Gentile churches to help them. That collection is mentioned in today's passage, but it's mentioned in other parts of the New Testament as well.

Now, we're not exactly sure why it is that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are so poor. Most probably it's because of the persecution that they're suffering that we read about in the book of Acts.

And as such, the Christians seem to have been ostracised from their community, ostracised by the other Jews, and they're really struggling, really struggling to make ends meet.

And so what Paul is doing is he's calling on the Gentile Christians to give money so that they can help their struggling sisters and brothers in Jerusalem. And actually, in the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul establishes the practice of giving.

[3 : 41] He says that on the first day of the week they should set aside this money, and then it will be collected up and taken to Jerusalem with letters of support from the Gentile churches.

So it all sounds good. It all sounds like a pretty good plan, and it seems that it all started okay amongst the Corinthians. But the trouble is they haven't maintained their generosity.

They started giving generously, but they've trailed off and seem to have stopped. And so what Paul is doing in this passage is challenging them to continue to do the good work that they started to do.

And he does that by using the example of the Macedonian churches. I want to have a look at this passage by examining the situation, the practice, and the motivation of both the Macedonian churches and also the church at Corinth.

And I think that will put us in a good position to then consider the church at Doncaster and to ask the questions of ourselves. What is our situation like? What is our practice like?

[4 : 48] And what should be motivating us in our generosity, in our giving? And we need to ask ourselves, are we more like the Macedonians who are held up as the example, or are we more like the Corinthians?

And do we need to change as a result of hearing God's word to us today? Well, if you'd look with me at 2 Corinthians chapter 8, we see that Paul starts this section by speaking about the Macedonians.

And when we speak about the Macedonian churches, Paul is speaking of the church at Philippi, at Thessalonica, and we have letters in our Bibles to both of those churches, Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

But there was also another church at Baroa. We don't have a letter to them, but those three churches, particularly what is in mind as he talks about the Macedonian churches. And he writes, as you see in verse 1, We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia.

Well, what is the situation of these churches? It seems pretty clear from the passage that they are not well off. If you have a look at verse 2, we see that Paul speaks of a severe ordeal of affliction and also extreme poverty.

[6 : 05] And we need to hold those two things together. Extreme affliction, poverty. Because the region of Macedonia wasn't a bad area to live in.

It wasn't renowned for its poverty. And it seems most likely that it's actually the Christians who are in extreme poverty, rather than the situation of all of the people who lived in the area.

Most likely the Christians are in extreme poverty because of the severe affliction that they're undergoing. They're being persecuted because they trust in Jesus.

And this persecution is spoken about in the letter of Philippians and also in 1 Thessalonians. So we know that these guys were really suffering for their faith in Jesus. And this persecution that they're undergoing would have led to being ostracised socially.

And it would have had devastating economic repercussions. So clearly these guys are really struggling to make ends meet because of their faith in Jesus.

[7 : 12] And as a result of this situation, Paul doesn't actually expect these Christians to contribute to the collection that he's making for the church at Jerusalem. You can see that down at the start of verse 5.

There's no expectation amongst Paul and his colleagues that these struggling Christians in Macedonia will give. You see, they're basically in the same situation as the struggling Jewish Christians.

They have been persecuted. They are struggling to make ends meet. They are in extreme poverty. So it would seem a little unfair that these struggling Christians would be asked to give money to other struggling Christians when they're both in the same situation.

So Paul doesn't expect them to give money. But that doesn't stop them. Have a look at their practice of giving. If you look back in verse 2, we see that despite their severe ordeal of affliction, they have abundant joy.

And despite their extreme poverty, they overflow in a wealth of generosity. And as Paul continues in verse 3, This group of churches, which are really doing it tough, so much so that they're not even asked to contribute money to this collection, beg Paul that they might contribute.

[8 : 55] Please, please, let us give money so that we can support our Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Please take our money. I suggest that.

We don't hear that sort of thing too often. These guys are overflowing in their generosity. They're giving beyond their means, beyond what they can afford. And they're begging for the privilege of doing it.

It's impressive stuff. I've been greatly challenged recently as I've been reading through the two biographies of English minister John Stott.

John Stott decided very early on in his ministry that he would live as frugally as possible so that he could give as much money as he could to support the worldwide church.

As a result, this man, who really is a superstar of modern-day Christianity, has lived for most of his life in just two rooms. His apartment just contains two rooms, his office and his bedroom, essentially.

[9 : 59] And every cent that he has earned from the millions and millions of books that he has sold has been used to buy books and to train pastors in the third world so that they can do ministry.

So in that way, he's given up pretty much everything that he has to support the worldwide church. He's a man of great generosity. And yet, the Macedonians are even more generous, I think, than John Stott's example.

They are extremely generous in what they do. So what's their motivation for this generosity? They don't have very much.

They have so little. And yet, what causes them not to cling on to the little that they have? And I think the answer that the passage gives us is that they have experienced God's grace in their lives and so they want to be gracious in their giving.

The word grace or gift appears throughout the passage. It's the key word of this passage. It keeps coming up again and again. Although it's not always translated in exactly the same way in our Bible, so we don't necessarily see it as obviously.

[11 : 12] But you see it right at the start of the passage that we're told that it is the grace of God that has been granted to the Macedonians. And when we think of God's grace, we think first and foremost of his gracious gift of his Son dying in our place so that we can be forgiven.

Clearly, the Macedonians have understood this grace of God. We see in verse 5 that they've given themselves to the Lord and also to the messengers who have brought the gospel.

They've accepted God's grace in their lives and they're experiencing it in their lives. I take it that the references to joy amidst affliction in verse 2 is joy in the Lord.

Even though they're suffering because they're following Jesus, they rejoice because they know that the gospel is such good news because God has been so gracious to them in sending his Son to die for them.

So the flow of events in the passage seems to be God's grace which leads to joy, which in turn leads to generosity, which itself is the gift of God.

[12 : 22] So the Macedonians are not motivated by guilt or by some sort of obligation, but they're motivated by God's grace working out itself in their lives.

God's grace which has been shown to them resulting in them being gracious and giving to the wider church. And Paul holds them up to the Corinthians as an example of what they should be like.

So what's the situation of the Corinthian church that this example needs to be held up to them? Well, if you have a look down in verses 13 and 14, Paul says, it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need.

In fact, the wealth of the city of Corinth was proverbial and it seems that the members of the church in Corinth were pretty well off too. So in contrast to the Macedonians, the Corinthians were cashed up.

They were a rich church financially. But that's not all because the church at Corinth was also extremely gifted. Down in verse 7 we read that they excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness.

[13 : 39] This is a church which is really a happening place. They have fantastic teachers and preachers. They have a good understanding of God and they do some spectacular things like speaking in tongues, prophesying, and working miracles.

They are well financed. They are gifted. They are one of those mega churches that probably other churches look at and go, wow, we'd love to be like them.

They're the envy perhaps of smaller churches around them. Which is great, isn't it? But what does their giving look like? Well, we need to consider their practice.

And sadly, their practice of giving is not crash hot. I spoke earlier about the fact that a collection had been started amongst the Corinthians, but it seems that they've fallen by the wayside.

In verse 6, we see that Paul has now urged Titus to go and complete the gift that had been started. And in verses 10 and 11, we read that, it is appropriate for you who began last year, not only to do something, but even to desire to do something, now finish doing it so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.

[14 : 57] They'd started so well, but it's not enough just to start. They need to keep going. Despite their wealth, despite their giftedness, despite being this mega church, they'd been shown up by the poverty-stricken Macedonians.

And Paul needs to say to them, finish the job. You have the means, so give according to the means that you have. Finish the job.

I have a friend who attends a church in Sydney. It's one of those churches in Sydney Diocese that really is one of the flagships of the Sydney Diocese.

It's in a suburb which is, again, well known for its wealth. This church has a large and gifted staff, people who have written books and who are wanted everywhere for their preaching skills.

The church has a thriving youth work, a thriving children's work, they are gifted, and they are rich. And yet a few years ago, my friend went on a mission trip with people from his church to Africa to visit some missionaries there, to visit some churches there.

[16 : 13] And in visiting a church in Nairobi in Kenya, a place which is well known for its poverty and the slums in that city, they were embarrassed to discover that the church that they were visiting in Nairobi gave more money per person than their home church back in wealthy Sydney.

In actual raw figures, more money per person than their home church back in Sydney. That's a modern day example, isn't it, of the contrast between Macedonia and Corinth.

We have this wealthy and gifted Sydney church which can't match the generosity of the poor Christians in Nairobi. And so Paul's advice to the Corinthians in verse 7 is very powerful.

As you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness and in our love for you, we want you to excel in this generous undertaking.

You might be a gifted church which is growing in a variety of areas, but is your giving also growing? Are you excelling in generosity?

[17 : 30] Are you getting better and better at giving? What should be the motivation for their generosity? And you'll notice here that Paul is extremely careful in spelling out what the motivation should be because he doesn't want the Corinthians to get the wrong idea about why they should be giving.

He wants them to give generously to support the Christians in Jerusalem, but he doesn't want them to do it for the wrong reasons. You see, of greater importance than the actual giving is the motivation for giving.

We saw that the Macedonians had the right motivation, so what should the motivation for the Corinthians be? Well, the key is verses 8 and 9, I think. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Paul is very careful not to command them to give, that they might feel under obligation because he's told them to that they have to do it. Instead, he reminds them of the example of the Lord that they serve, of Jesus.

[18 : 50] He was rich and yet he became poor so that the Corinthians might be rich. This is a reminder of that great passage in Philippians chapter 2 where Jesus, who is in very nature God, does not cling to the riches of heaven but becomes human and as a human goes to the cross.

He humbles himself, he becomes poor, dying for sin so that we and the Corinthians might be rich. He dies so that we might be right with God, so that we might be called children of God and so that we might experience the richness that that position brings.

Paul is reminding the Corinthians that they serve a Lord who is generous, who is gracious. They serve a Lord who gave up everything for them. The very basis of their relationship with God is grace.

The Macedonians have understood that and they overflow in generosity as a result. But have the Corinthians properly understood it? And Paul wants to test the genuineness of their love and see whether their grace matches the grace of the Lord who they serve.

You notice also down in verses 13 and 14 that they should also be motivated by a sense of balance or fairness amongst the worldwide church. Paul is not asking the Corinthians to make themselves poverty stricken by giving all their money away.

[20 : 29] But he wants them to be aware that at present they are so rich they have such an abundance and that is not the case of Christians around the world. There are many who are suffering. He wants the Corinthians to think globally, to think outside their local congregation and to think of the church not just as a local group meeting together but as a worldwide movement.

And they bear responsibility for Christians in other parts of the world. The idea in verse 15 should be that the one who had much did not have too much and the one who had little did not have too little.

Well that brings us to ourselves here at Doncaster. what are we like in our generosity? How does our situation, our practice and our motivation compare to the Corinthians and to the Macedonians?

Well I think there can be little argument that our situation is more like the Corinthians than the Macedonians. You might have heard the illustration before that if you put all of the people in the world into a 10 car train obviously it would need to be a large 10 car train but if every person in the world was put into a 10 car train so that the people who had the most money and resources were up the front of the train and then it gradually worked its way down to the back of the train from there whereabouts would the average Australian be placed on that train?

The answer is that the average Australian would be well and truly in the front carriage of the train even Australians who are not well off at all would probably still be placed in the front carriage of that train by world standards.

[22 : 19] But what about if we sharpened the illustration somewhat and we thought about it as putting all of the world's churches in a 10 car train? Whereabouts in that train would Holy Trinity Doncaster be placed?

Well I imagine that we'd be so far up the front of the train that Paul Barker would be able to tap the driver on the shoulder. You see like the Corinthians we are relatively well off financially but we're also blessed with many gifts in this church.

We're privileged to have a large and gifted staff team. This church is packed full of people who are well educated, gifted teachers, gifted musicians, prayers, trades people and administrators.

Now don't get me wrong I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with this situation. It's a great gift from God that we should rejoice in. But we need to ask ourselves given that we have this abundance is our practice of giving consistent with the means that we have at our disposal?

Are we giving according to our means? Now I realise that this is an uncomfortable question to ask. We don't like talking about money.

[23 : 44] It's embarrassing and it's awkward. And yet as Christians, people who call Jesus Lord, we need to bring every aspect of our lives under his lordship.

We need to ask ourselves have we plunged ourselves entirely under the water in Christ or are we trying to keep some parts out dry for ourselves?

In our giving, are we more like the Corinthians or the Macedonians? And this is not just a question about giving to the local church either.

You see, the generosity of the Macedonians was seen in the way that they gave to support the worldwide church. And the criticism that was made of the Corinthian church mentions nothing about their giving to the local church.

They may well have been quite good at giving to the local church. They certainly thought that the church at Corinth was a pretty happening place. What they're criticised for is their lack of giving to the worldwide church.

[24 : 51] So we need to ask ourselves, how do we go with this? Are we generous not only at a local level, but globally as well? Are we as a church giving generously enough to mission and to Christian aid organisations?

Are we committed to the worldwide church and not just our local congregation? The Christian life is one that involves ongoing growth and maturity.

We're called on to grow in every aspect of our lives. And the challenge from our present passage is to be growing in our generosity. As we grow in our knowledge and understanding of the Bible, as we grow in other aspects of our lives, is that being matched by our growing generosity in our lives?

The New Testament doesn't give us any set amount that we should give. It just encourages us to give generously. Certainly the Old Testament tithing system of giving 10% is a helpful starting point for us.

But perhaps we need to ask ourselves, have we excelled in our generosity beyond this? Or do we need to excel in our generosity towards this? Again, given our privileged situation, for many of us to give according to our means will mean giving more than 10%.

[26 : 21] But finally, we also need to consider this morning what our motivation for giving is. We don't want to give for the wrong reasons.

And the danger of hearing a sermon like this is that we all feel guilty, especially as the plate is passed around later in the service. But that is not the right motivation.

We're not to be motivated by guilt or obligation. The great missionary to China, J. Hudson Taylor, after making appeals for support, used to insist that people should not give instinctively.

He would say to people, unless you have come along here already planning to give, do not instinctively put into the plate as it goes around. Instead, he encouraged people to go away and prayerfully consider what they had heard before giving.

And I think the same advice is helpful for us here this morning too. The proper motivation for us in being generous should be God's generosity, God's grace to us in Christ.

[27 : 32] So can I challenge each one here this morning to go away and prayerfully consider the graciousness of God to us in sending his son?

God's grace to us. And as we reflect on how gracious God has been to us, in that context, we can properly weigh up whether we are being gracious and giving generously.

We can assess our own lives in light of the generosity of God. We need to ask ourselves whether God's grace has so impacted every aspect of our lives that we are overflowing with joy because of his grace and therefore overflowing in generosity for the church.

Amen.