

Grace Upon Grace

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[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads and pray as we stand. Heavenly Father, we ask now that you would give us a sight and taste of your grace.

As you speak to us, Lord, take away the anxiety and the heaviness that so many of us bear around this issue of money and give us the lightheartedness that we need to love you and serve you.

And for we ask in Christ's name, amen. Amen. Please sit down. Well, now, if you would turn back to 2 Corinthians chapter 9 on page 968 in your Bible.

This is our third in these two chapters, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and the basic message is that you all take money far too seriously. It looks at one level, doesn't it, as you go through 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

On the surface, Paul is trying to raise money. And he does talk about financial generosity and Christian giving, but the chapters are really about the grace of God.

[1 : 10] And the grace of God is like a massive asteroid that has hit a planet, and it's a dying planet. And the planet's atmosphere has been poisoned by this atmosphere of lust for money.

And the population is becoming sicker and sicker with fear and anxiety about money because they all take money too seriously. And instead of destroying the planet, the asteroid begins a massive salvage operation and returns the atmosphere very gradually.

It returns the planet to its original beauty, and it puts money in its place, and the people begin to breathe fresh air of joy and goodness again.

One of the best books on this whole issue is by Craig Gay, who is in the congregation. He's a regent prof. It's called *Cash Values, Money and the Erosion of Meaning in Today's Society*.

And I had a copy, and I marked it all up, and someone stole it. If you have it, read it. So I went to Craig, and he gave me another one.

[2 : 25] And I just, I'm going to shamelessly steal all his best stuff, if that's okay. He's not saying yes or no. That's very worrying.

Craig makes the point that it may be harder for us to talk about money at this time than in any other time through history because of the way in which money has become an absolute and unquestioned good in our culture.

We have exalted the money unit. We talked about this in the first week as the measure of all things, remember? So we live in this market totalitarianism where we measure everything by money and empty everything of its true meaning.

And we do that by a certain transformation. Money brings about a kind of an alchemy where you can take anything and you can reduce it to a financial price by making it into a commodity.

You can take a child and give a financial value to it. You can take a work of art or you can even rent a friend. This is true. In the most innocent sense, you can rent a friend.

[3 : 38] There are agencies where you can go to a city and you can pay some money and someone will show you the sights. I'm not encouraging you to do that. I'm just saying that's what you can do.

But you see, the transformation that money brings empties that thing of its real meaning. It's not a real friend. And it makes those things weightless.

It robs them of their glory. You know, the value of a child. I mean, a child is more valuable than the universe. But money and this money equation and this money transformation consumes the true substance and glory of the child.

It just makes it disappear. And what happens is we gradually, gradually our hearts attach to money. And as we attach to money, we detach from each other.

We grow steadily indifferent. And it's a devastating thing on community. Witness Vancouver. And the world becomes flat and the world becomes grey. And it's covered with cha-ching, dollar signs here and there.

[4 : 44] And we increasingly need to be entertained and we crave excitement for ourselves. And Craig's book's very helpful because the analysis goes deeper.

He picks up on Jesus' teaching and he says, the reason we worship money is because the way it works is it works through fear and anxiety.

You see, money gives us the illusion that we are in control. You know, the fantasy that life is mine. I should live for today. I should spend it on luxury and pleasure.

But basically because I have a deep-seated fear and insecurity that this world is evil. And the only thing I can really rely on is money. And Craig says, it reveals an almost ridiculous lack of trust in the goodness of God for us as Christians.

But as we come to 2 Corinthians chapter 9, the Apostle Paul talks about an opposite transformation. It works in the completely opposite way.

[5 : 46] It's another alchemy and it's the transformation of grace and generous giving. And he explains this to us through one primary picture and it's the picture of farming.

It's brilliant. It takes us out of the world of economics and commodities and puts us down in the soil and puts seeds in our hands and it pictures each of us as farmers who have been given a certain amount of seed.

And after we've been given that amount of seed and after we put it in the soil, it's out of our hands. We can't dig it up.

And if we do, we ruin it. God brings the sun. God brings the rain. It's God who brings the harvest. And this is how grace works, not just in financial giving, but in every area of our lives.

I am not in control. And it means that the world we live in and the world in which we give money is alive with the purpose of God. And by giving, I'm not reducing things to being commodities.

[6 : 52] I'm producing fruit, harvest, as we'll see in just a moment. And the passage is full of this amazing language, the language that comes from the creation passages at the beginning of Genesis, that we're not doing deals.

We're actually doing something that is fruitful and increases and multiplies with life and power. And rather than emptying things of meaning and flattening things, it fills life and can fill other people with the blessing of God.

That's a key word. That's God's original purpose. That's his purpose in the world, blessing. So when you offer your money or yourself or any of your resources to God generously, God takes it and transforms it and does something with it.

You know, if you put \$100 or you put \$1,000 in a mission organization or in the plate as an offering, it's not \$100. God takes it into his purposes and he uses it for blessing.

And such blessing does he use it for? It would make you blush if you could see it. And this generous giving, Paul is saying here, it begins a new chain of cause and effect where God himself brings blessing instead of anxiety, brings love instead of fear.

[8 : 10] So that generous Christian giving is profoundly subversive. It always has been. But for us, it demotes money from its God-like status.

It treats money not as something to be loved and worshipped, but as something to be used and to be used for blessing. And therefore, we can use it lightheartedly. Isn't that a great word? Comes from Craig.

Do you know in the Proverbs, you're thinking about starting out in your career, the Proverbs says this, says, Lord, don't make me poor or rich, but just give me my daily bread.

If I have too much, I'll disown you and say, who is the Lord? Or if I become too poor, I'll steal and dishonor the Lord. That's a lighthearted way of looking at life, isn't it? So in chapter 8, we have looked at a number of touchstones of Christian giving and they've been quite practical.

Underneath all of them has been the grace of God. And do you remember as we looked at them, we saw that those touchstones we can use to assess the grace, the graciousness of our giving, as it were.

[9 : 18] And it's online. You can download those talks. Chapter 9 is different. It's all motivation. And what the apostle does is he spells out the effects of giving in three ways, to three groups.

He explains the effects of our giving on others, on ourselves, and on God. And I'll spend most of the time on the middle one because that's what Paul does. Firstly, what is the effect of generous giving on others?

Well, Paul begins with this word, blessing. He's writing to Christians who are in Greece. And he says, in giving financial aid, which he's collecting for, to the Christians in Jerusalem, the Corinthians are not just going to meet the needs of those Christians in Jerusalem, but they are going to bring blessing.

Have a look down at verse 5, please. Now, if your eyes are like mine, you might need special glasses. But in that verse, in tiny footnotes, you'll be able to see down the bottom, in even smaller font, what the original actually says.

And I will make it easy. I will, let me just tell you what it actually says. So verse 5, and it's a very fine translation, one that we've got here, but let me show you.

[10:39] So verse 5, Paul says, I thought it necessary to urge the brothers, the Macedonian brothers, to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the, the word is, blessing, not gift.

You have promised so that it may be ready as a blessing. Same word, not as an exaction. In other words, Paul calls the collection of money that the Corinthians make, he calls it the blessing.

So that as they give, they are actively involved in God's activity of blessing. Now, I know blessing is a massive Bible word, and we've reduced it to a sort of a vague positive feeling.

Bless your heart. By the way, if you travel in the south of the United States, bless your heart means, really, you're an idiot. I'm telling you the truth.

If you do something stupid, and someone says, bless your heart, what they mean is, you need to go back and start again on that. That's not the way it's used in the Bible.

[11:50] What it means is, it's not just words. Blessing means an actual change brought about by God's power.

So in the Old Testament, when God says to Aaron, bless the people with these words, it's actually bringing to those people the change that it's speaking about. And usually it's God who blesses us in this way.

His blessing transmits his goodness and grace. And it's used in creation for being fruitful and multiplying and having children.

And blessing is the big purpose of God throughout the Bible, where he's bringing us back into his presence. Isn't this how all the best gifts work? You give a gift, and it brings something more.

You give a child ice skates, and suddenly they're able to play ice hockey. Or Dr. Packer, when he was a child, he was hit by a truck, and as he was recuperating, his parents gave him a typewriter.

[12:55] What a blessing that typewriter has been to many of us. One of the blessings that the Corinthians set up in others is mentioned in verse 2, because it stirred up the zeal of the Macedonians to give.

That's what happens. When Christians give generously, we stir up the zeal of other Christians. Our sister church, a couple of miles away, Good Shepherd, had the opportunity to buy their property a few years ago, and they began to speak about it, and the congregation started to step up to the plate, and a number of young marrieds remortgaged their homes.

It's astonishing. And that's where we have sinned year by year now. So the financial gifts of the Corinthians have this overflow, but it's a spiritual overflow.

Look down at verse 12, please. The ministry of this service, that's the money, is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but it's also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.

By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession to the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of their contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.

[14:14] That's amazing. There's an amazing list of spiritual blessings there in the lives of others, right? What happens when the gift comes, Paul says? The Jerusalem Christians, those who receive it, don't give thanks to the Corinthians.

They give thanks to God himself because the money's come as an answer to prayer. Do you find it amazing that giving money can strengthen other people's faith in God?

It can connect them more tightly to God. And it's a transparent demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ who gave himself for us and that it's penetrated the heart of this pagan Greek culture.

There's just some you could look and find more. There's some of the effects on others. But secondly, the apostle Paul wants to turn us to the effect on ourselves. And this is what the apostle wants to emphasize. And here we come to farming, the farming picture. Because when you farm, I'm told, it changes you.

[15:15] You. Because as we give, in giving, it's God's direct action from start to end.

And as we give, we're caught up in what God's doing. Let's just look at verse 10 in a bit of detail. There are three big phrases. So it begins by saying, God who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food.

Stop there. So everything that you and I have is God's. Came from God in the beginning. But you say, hang on a second. I made my money. I worked hard.

But my ideas, they're original to me. Well, actually, your mind and your body came to you from God. Everything you have is from him. And we often pray when we receive the offerings, all things are yours, O Lord.

Of your own have we given you. We ought to say a hearty amen to that. Absolutely. So he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food. Second phrase, will supply and multiply your seed for sowing.

[16:23] So as you give your money, you plant a seed in the ground. It disappears. It may as well be dead, right? It's like putting a seed in the soil. But when it falls into the ground, Paul says God gives it a new life.

He grows that seed silently, invisibly, and slowly. It's completely out of sight. We can't get our hands on it, thankfully.

And he transforms it. This is a big transformation by his creation power. And he increases it and multiplies it so that we might be able to sow more in the future.

And then thirdly, in verse 10, he will increase the harvest of your righteousness. And the word harvest is the word children. So that in giving, our money has spiritual children, living and breathing grandchildren.

And it's a harvest of righteousness because when we give its right, because that's doing what God does. So the harvest is a spiritual offspring which belongs to us in some way.

[17:34] And in verse 7, the apostle says that the harvest is eternal. He says your righteousness endures forever. I just, I want you to think about this for just a moment.

When we give to the work of the Lord out of the grace of God, it silences that great hymn to money that we sing in our culture so often. You know how it goes.

It's all about the here and now. It's all about the here and now. But God takes the gift and not only brings blessing to others, but he says, Paul says, there is a profound effect on us.

That by his creative power, God himself brings eternal spiritual fruit in our lives. It's not just for those at the receiving end.

It's for those of us at the giving end. And in some way, we reap the transformation that God has achieved now. That's what he's saying. I mean, there'll be a number of ways of seeing this.

[18:36] First, we begin to grind down the grip of greed in our hearts. I mean, look back at verse five, if you will, for a moment. The last word in that verse is not as an exaction.

That's the word greed. Paul says, give as a blessing, not out of greediness. He's not talking about whether they feel free or forced to give.

He's talking about the attitude of giving either with generosity and graciousness or out of greediness that stops us giving. He's talking about stingy giving, tight giving, giving that's controlled by greed and covetousness.

The word literally means an insatiable desire to have more money. And Paul says that if that's the way you give, if you give out of greed, your gifts will be small and your fruit, your harvest will be miserable.

That's why giving generously has always been subversive and it's particularly subversive for us. I mean, is money the central idol in our culture?

[19:41] Maybe, probably. And greed certainly is idolatry where we bow down before the idol so that every act of Christian generosity puts the axe to the idol and begins to loosen the chains which hold us so tightly.

This is so important that Paul uses this language in verse 6. You see the first four words in verse 6? He says, the point is this.

There is no break between verses 5 and 6. There's no paragraph there. Wouldn't you love it if preachers were to say, the point is this, and then they made the point.

Paul does. I'm not, well, what does Paul say? Verse 6. Let's read it again. The point is this.

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.

And whoever sows blessingly will also reap blessingly. Here's the question.

[20 : 44] On the farm, who is it that sows? You do. On the farm, who is it that reaps? You do. So generous giving is not just for the benefit of those who receive.

It is a greater blessing to those of us who give. It's a blessing to us. It's reversing the curse of money. And giving generously from the heart brings blessing to us because as we do it, God takes up our gifts and enables us to participate in the big salvage of this world.

Wasn't that an amazing first reading where Jesus himself healed the eyes of the blind man. Jesus could have done it like that, but instead he says, do you believe that I can do this? He brings the guy up so that he participates in the work.

That's what he's doing for us in giving. And Paul's point here is it is the same person who sows as reaps. You sow small, you reap small. You sow stingy, you reap stingy.

You sow blessingly, you reap blessingly. If we give and hold back with a tight fist, God can't put anything more into our fist.

[21 : 54] If we give with an open hand, God can put more blessing back in our hand. That's why every single one of us must make a plan for our giving. That's the point of verse 7.

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart. Not reluctantly, not regretfully or under compulsion. God loves a cheerful giver.

Each one. Every single one of us, we have a personal responsibility, an individual responsibility to contribute. In Corinth, all their gifts went to one big corporate present, and that corporate present went to Jerusalem, and none of their names were on that present.

But you see, God was involved in every step. God was involved at the step where each Corinthian thought about, in his heart or her heart, what they should give, just as God is involved with each of us, as we pray and seek to give, not just our money, but other resources as well to be a blessing to others.

And he tells us God loves it. He just loves it when we do it. Now, I think because when we give like that, we're never more like Jesus Christ, giving freely.

[23 : 14] It shows we actually believe and trust in the grace of God. And as we do this, as we give in this way, we draw God's grace into our lives. I think that's why it's possible to give lightheartedly or cheerfully or joyfully.

And we don't have time to do it, but verse 8 is a marvelous verse. If you want to take this passage and meditate this afternoon, verse 8 or verse 10 would give you enough for weeks, I believe.

See, verse 8, God is able to make all grace overflow to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may overflow in every good work.

And it's just a fantastic verse for every situation in life, but especially for finance. God's grace, he gives us all grace for every context.

In other words, his grace is sufficient for every dark corner of unbelief in our hearts. It's sufficient at all times, in all things, so that we can overflow in good works.

[24 : 24] And this is the effect of God's grace and generous giving on ourselves. It's only the sufficiency of God's grace in our lives that can break that iron grip of greed.

It is his active supplying grace to us. And then we begin to see that he is enough. He's enough. He's sufficient. Greed says, got to have more, got to have more, got to have more.

But as we give ourselves to the Lord and we give our resources to him, he provides us what we need and we learn we can do more good works. Not self-sufficiency, not trusting my resources, but depending on God's unlimited ability here.

I think, I think generous giving is the way of godly weakness. It's a, it's a weak, it's a weak thing to do. And you know, from the beginning of two Corinthians, we've seen how God overturns some of our cultural attachments and uses them in a different way.

We live a life of paradox. And as we live the life of paradox, God works through us, turning the world the right way up. Remember? Joy in suffering and, uh, boasting in humility and glory and shame, power in weakness.

[25 : 41] In a couple of weeks, we're going to come to chapter 12. And in chapter 12, at the one of the most difficult points of Paul's life, the Lord says to him, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in your weakness. That is true in every area of the Christian life. It is especially true in giving generously. If I'm going to give joyfully or generously, I have to believe that God's grace is sufficient for me.

I have to believe that his power is made perfect in weakness. Because giving in this way, it means saying, I am not in control of my future. I don't own it.

God owns it. It's not easy, but Martin Luther, who was a great writer from a couple of centuries ago, he said, there are three conversions.

The first is the conversion of my heart. The second is the conversion of my mind. And the third is the conversion of my wallet. Sometimes the third one takes a long time.

[26 : 49] But you know, this passage is very hopeful. And although this generosity that Paul's talking about here may be outside your experience, it's hopeful because God can still work change in us as we grow in generosity, because financial giving is learning to rely on his grace.

It's weaning ourselves off those fears and weaning ourselves onto the grace of God. So the effect on us is massive. The effect on others is huge. And thirdly and finally, and very briefly, there is an effect on God himself.

And I say this reverently, that God somehow allows us and enables us to affect him. That he loves to prove his sufficiency to us.

He loves to be involved in the lives of those who are taking these risky steps. He loves to give us more grace so that we will experience more of his grace. He loves a cheerful giver.

Do you notice in the farming picture, God is actively involved at every step. He supplies the seed. And his promise in verse 10 is that he will multiply the seed and increase that harvest of righteousness, that eternal harvest.

[28 : 04] But perhaps the most amazing effect comes to us at the end of verse 12 and 13, where we find out that the financial giving overflows in thanksgiving to God, and in God receiving glory.

We've talked about this a lot. The glory of God, glory is his weightiness, his heaviness. It's the true value of his splendor and loving kindness and holiness and purity.

glory is his glory. And to glorify God is to see and acknowledge that great weightiness of the Lord. It's to adore him and bow before him.

And to increase his glory, as this financial gift did, is to increase what can never be increased. And to make large his glory is to make what is larger than the universe and cannot even contain.

And this is what we were made for. And I think this is what lies at the heart of generous giving. It's a vision of the glory of God. It's this that gives to giving.

[29 : 13] It's transforming power. And just as money strips things of their glory and strips things of their true value and makes them weightless, giving generously adds glory and weight back to where it belongs.

The Bible doesn't say we should all become ascetics and go out into the desert and have nothing to do with money. It says there's a great irony for us that we ought to use our money to promote the glory of God.

Instead of bowing down before it, anxiety and fear, God makes it possible for us to use our money to increase his glory. And as he finishes, Paul can't help himself, but he has to refer to Jesus again in the last verse.

He says, Thanks be to God for his inexpressible, unspeakable gift. The Jesus who came as the embodiment of grace.

And you know how the way of glory, you know how the glory of God came to us through Jesus? It was as Jesus was put in the ground as a seed and died. And the glory that has come to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus outweighs our lives, outweighs everything, and it makes everything else light in comparison.

[30 : 32] So as we pray, let's bow before the Lord of glory. Let's pray for his glory and that he would instill in us a sense of his glory and give us the grace of generosity.

Let's kneel for prayer. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.