

Act of Grace

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- [0 : 00] If you would take your Bible and open to 2 Corinthians 8 on page 9, 6, 7. It is just so wonderful for us to go back to this second letter from the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians.
- And we're going to finish the letter, hopefully. But for the next three weeks, we're going to look at chapters 8 and 9, which deal with the second big issue in the letter, which is the issue of money and Christian giving.
- And you're sitting there saying, oh no, I've barely paid off Christmas and the January holidays and we hear a fundraising sermon. You're saying, I knew it. All you Christians are interested in is my money.
- And I want to say right at the start, God does not want your money. God does not need your money. And it's not yours anyway.
- But that's... We will come to that. The amazing thing is that the Bible doesn't look at money from a cultural perspective or from a monetary standpoint.
- [1 : 20] It talks a lot about money. When it does, its central concern is not really morality or justice or being a good person. The Bible's not so interested in how you make your money or how you spend your money or how much you have.
- It even... I mean, it deals with greed and selfishness, but that's not at the heart. When the Bible deals with money, it says it's a matter of worship.
- Who God is, of who you and I are, and who we're becoming. Because money is a profoundly spiritual reality. The Bible says that money is not...
- It's neither strictly, in its own sense, negative, nor is it strictly... It's not evil or good. But here's the thing most people forget.
- It's not neutral. It's not an object that you control. The Bible says it's a spiritual power.
- [2 : 23] A kind of a God. Something that claims our worship. So we give sacred qualities to it. We say we save our money and our money saves us. Money promises grace.
- Money promises to justify us. To make our lives worthwhile. To give us security. To make us happy. To give us everything that we love and want. To make us feel good about ourselves.
- And it has a suggestion in it that we can live a very good life apart from God. It's amazing to see what the Apostle does in these two chapters.
- And there's so much in chapters 8 and 9. We're going to spend three weeks looking at these two chapters. This week we're going to look at the why and how of Christian giving.
- Next week we're going to talk about how much to give. And I know you're all looking forward to that one. And the week after that the key to generosity.
- [3 : 19] And they're a package. Three weeks. So you need to come all of them. Especially the middle one. Here is the back story of this in Corinthians. So the Apostle Paul is over in Asia Minor.
- In Macedonia and Greece. And he is making a financial collection. For a group of Christians who are back in Jerusalem. Jewish Christians who are suffering under famine.

And a year ago. The Corinthian church. Very wealthy church. Had said to Paul. Count us in. We are the wealthiest church in the New Testament.

They didn't actually say that. I'm just. He said. These are our brother and sister Christians. Who are suffering famine and persecution over there in Jerusalem. And we owe them a massive spiritual debt.

Because the gospel came to us. We want to give. And sometime later. If you'd like to look at it. At the end of his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 16.

[4 : 19] Paul begins to explain some principles. About how they should give them instructions. He says every week. You should put apart some of your income. Depending on how much you receive that week.

And you should choose trusted people. To take the money and collect it. And he says you should make a plan. And although I'm not preaching on that passage. I just have to say. That unless you make a plan.

You're not really serious about your giving. You make a plan about your family. And your budget. And your spending. It's the same with giving. It should be deliberate. And plan not occasional.

Or casual. Because otherwise. You'll miss out on God's grace. So the Corinthians said. Count us in. But that was a year ago. And wouldn't you know it.

Over the last year. A group of teachers had come in. And said. No, no, no, no. You don't give money away. Except to us. What you do is. God wants you to be wealthy.

[5 : 15] God wants you to be prosperous. Giving money away to those poor. Jewish Christians. Is the wrong thing to do. Because poor people deserve to be poor.

That was their argument. And it's amazing to see what the apostle does. I mean, if you were writing to the Corinthians. Wealthy church. Right? Wealthy church. Lots of money.

Who committed to giving. What would you say? What would you do? It's very interesting what Paul does not do. He does not say to them. Give 10%. Give a tithe.

Wouldn't that have been the easiest thing for him to say? He could have pulled off. You know. Probably a hundred Old Testament texts out. And said. Just give a tenth of what you get. That was the Old Testament marker. And what's fascinating.

Is that in the New Testament. Nowhere. Is the tithe. Held up. As an amount you should give. It's not denied. It's not denied.

[6 : 15] But it's never appealed to. And I think one of the problems with tithing. Or giving to 10%. Is that you can get to a place. Where you're giving 10% of your income to God.

And you think of it as a bit of a tax. And you think. Okay. I'll give God a tenth. The rest is mine. To do with what I wish. So God. Paul doesn't say to them to tithe.

Nor does he send them a terrible. Moving and manipulative. Description of the poverty. Famine and persecution. That the Christians in Jerusalem. You know those awful.

Full color brochures. That tug at the heart strings. So that they'll loosen the purse strings. Nor does he send them an attractive thermometer. With the amount that he expects them.

He never mentions an amount. He takes us the opposite direction. From calculation and manipulation. And he takes us toward.

[7 : 11] Grace. The free giving gift. Of God's grace. And I know you're going to find this hard to believe. But Paul's aim here.

Is not to raise a certain amount of cash. For the Christians in Jerusalem. His aim in these chapters. As we'll see. Is for the Corinthians. To experience.

The genuine grace of God. In their lives. So that they will know. Jesus Christ better. And they'll become more like. Jesus Christ. They'll learn. This sort of joy.

This joy of drawing. On the grace of God. Whether they're wealthy. Or whether they're poor. No matter how much they give. I say that because. Grace is the big reality.

In chapters 8 and 9. They be. The chapters begin with grace. And they end with grace. And grace is scattered through. All throughout the section. Just have a look at the first verse.

[8 : 06] For a moment. We want you to know. Brothers and sisters. And the word about is not there. We want you to know. The grace of God. That has been given among the churches.

Of Macedonia. He doesn't just. He's not announcing it. Saying I want you to know about it. He's saying. I want you to know this grace. I want you to experience. The same grace. That they did.

This is not the grace. Which is God's character. Of you know. Giving. It is. It is. God's. It's the experience. Of God giving through you.

It's God's. Grace. Acting. And moving. Making concrete. Decisions. Through the lives. Of individuals.

And that's why. It is. The grace of God. Which begins. Continues. Deepens. And sustains. Christian generosity. And we're going to look at the first nine verses briefly.

[9 : 04] And what the apostle does. Is he holds up two examples of grace. And gives five principles. Of how we should give. And the obvious example. You know. The big example.

The embodiment of grace. Is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that's verse nine. So if you just turn over to verse nine please. You know the grace.

Of our Lord Jesus Christ. That though he was rich. Yet for your sake. He became poor. So that you by his poverty. Might become rich.

Beautiful text. Yeah. We use this at Christmas time. And it's right to use it at Christmas time. But originally it was written. In a fundraising couple of chapters. No not fundraising. In a grace couple of chapters.

It's about the joy of Jesus. Who gave himself for us. How rich was Jesus. He was unimaginably rich. You know for eternity.

[10 : 05] Before the creation of the world. Jesus Christ enjoyed the glory of the father. And intimacy and security and love. When the world was created. Everything was created through him.

And for him. He owns it all. You could not be richer. How poor did he become. Well he didn't just become a baby for us. And enter our world. But in his love.

He gave himself willingly. To suffer death in our place. He gave his life away. His eternal life away. So that we might receive. All the blessings that he had.

Before he came into the world. That's grace. It is the willingness. To give up your own rights. For the sake of meeting the needs.

Of another person. I know that cuts against the grain. Jesus did it. So that we. By his poverty. Might become rich.

[10 : 58] And you may say. What on earth has that got to do with money? Well grace. Is grace. Because it's not bought. You can't pay for it.

It's given freely. We couldn't afford it anyway. I mean there's no cost. There's not nothing you can pay. To win your life back. And yet Christ.

Gladly gave his away. And I think. If you think about this. For just a moment. It's only grace. That begins to unravel. The power. That money holds.

Over us. What. What. What money does. And what we do with money. Is this. It converts. Everything that we touch.

Into an object. And it. Empties it. Of all its meanings. Except financial meaning. So money approaches. A beautiful piece of art. And it looks at its provenance.

[11 : 55] And history. And its beauty. And it puts a dollar value on it. And since money is seeking to replace God. And because my desires are so disordered.

We've become very adept. At calculating everything in terms of money. We talk about a person's net worth. That's a. That's a terrible phrase. You know.

Houses are all about money now. We think. We. We think about family. And future. About money. We. But you see.

Grace works. In exactly the opposite direction. It's not naive. About money. But grace. Is all about the power. Of giving away. Giving away.

Giving away. It's not. Make. Making the calculation. Of buying. And selling. And making objects. Out of things. See. What grace does. Is grace. When it comes into a person's life.

[12 : 50] You suddenly see. My life is a gift. It's a gift. From God. And then my actions of giving. Create. Big meaning. They don't empty meaning. Like money does.

They create bigger meaning. Of kindness. And relationship. And freeness. And. And it opens us to the pain. Of loving. Jacques Ellul. Who's a Christian writer.

Says this. He says. God does not obey the law of money. But a different law. The law of giving. And I quote. He says. In the new world. The kingdom of God. That God is creating.

Nothing is for sale. Everything is given away. The mark of the world of money. Is the exact opposite. Of the mark of God's world. Where everything is free.

Where giving is the normal way to act. Because we're dictated by grace. The love created by money and selling. Is the exact opposite. Of the love created by grace. And giving.

[13 : 47] I think. I think that's brilliant. Worth thinking about. That's why. Jesus Christ. Is the highest example. In the embodiment of grace. Because in Jesus Christ.

It is the only time. That God ever submitted himself. To the calculus of money. Where Jesus Christ. Became. An object of trade. Where he was sold. For 30 pieces of silver.

The son of God. Became. Merchandise. We give. Because he gave. And all the grace. Of God.

Is found in Jesus Christ. It's a magnificent example. And you might be sitting there. Thinking. Well. That is fantastic. It's beautiful. And wonderful. But I can't possibly. Live up to it. And you can't. And neither can I.

So. Paul gives a second example. And that is. The Macedonians. And this is how grace works. In the lives of ordinary people. You with me? Okay. So have a look.

[14 : 43] Verses 2 to 5. Back to chapter 8. Verses 2 to 5. Macedonia is north of Greece. Philippi. Thessalonica. And Berea. These people are nowhere near as wealthy.

As the Corinthians. And they are facing. Persecution. So what does the grace of God look like. In difficult circumstances.

In the lives of ordinary people. And I want to pull out five principles. Which were all there in Jesus giving. But five principles for Christian giving. I mean you get a bonus here.

Because I've already done one. Haven't I? It should be planned. So there's really six. But I've only got a certain amount of time. So let's look at the five. Okay. Number one. If Christian giving is truly based on the grace of God.

It'll be joyful. Verses 1 and 2. We want you to know the grace of God. That's been given among the churches of Macedonia. For in a severe test of affliction.

- [15 : 43] Which means persecution here. Their abundance of joy. And their extreme poverty. Has overflowed in a wealth of generosity.
- On their behalf. Something is going on for the Macedonians. That's got nothing to do with their circumstances. Yeah. We know from the record.
- That some of them had been imprisoned. And beaten. And lost their jobs. Because they had become Christians. Their circumstances were not rosy. But right in the middle of that difficulty.
- Right in the midst of their experience of suffering. They experienced the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And it had set up a happiness in them. An overwhelming happiness.
- And I don't know. I don't know any better word for it. It's concealed in the English. But these words. Grace. And joy. And thanksgiving. All come from the same root.
- [16 : 40] Kara. Which basically means happy. Delightful. Joyful. But the order is very important. They received the grace of God.
- First. And then they experienced the joy of giving. See. Their generous giving is not a result of their personal moral virtue. They gave because they were already experiencing the joy of God's grace.
- Their joy did not come from their circumstances. Which is very important to remember. Because I hear so many people say. Well. You know.
- God has made me wealthy. And therefore. He's blessed me. And that's true in a sense. But these guys. They're not. They're not joyful. Because things are smooth sailing.
- And they've got a lot of money. But because they know God. The real giver. Who's given them. In Jesus Christ. Something beyond comparison. All together. And there's a world of difference.
- [17 : 39] Isn't there. By giving to display my great generosity and compassion. Putting my name on something. And giving out of a sense of the great satisfaction and acceptance that I have in God.
- One commentator says. This giving is not a way of showing God how much we can do for him. But a way of illustrating how much God has done for us.
- That's the first principle. That's what grace looks like in action. Means Christians will give joyfully. Second. Christians will give sacrificially. Verse three.
- They gave according to their means. As I can testify. And beyond their means. Of their own accord. Now.
- This is not. This is not rosy glasses here. In verse two. Paul described this situation as very grim. Extreme poverty. Literally rock. Bottom. Poor.
- [18 : 39] But the grace of God had worked in them in such a way. Their poverty. Paul says. Overflowed in a wealth of generous. Generosity. My guess is. That if you collected all the money the Macedonians had given.
- It wouldn't add to much. And my guess is. That anyone in the Corinthian congregation. Could probably give a hundred times. Or a thousand times. What all the churches in Macedonia had given.
- That's irrelevant. The amount is not important. It's the grace of God. Which creates this sacrificial generosity. Which exceeds natural explanation.
- Explanation. Some of us in this church have seen this. In 2005. We went to a conference. Somewhere in the States. As part of the Anglican.
- Church of North America. America. And one of the speakers on the platform. Was Baroness. Carolyn Cox. It was the year of Hurricane Katrina.

[19 : 37] And Cox. Had just come to the States. From visiting a persecuted group of people. Persecuted group of Christians. In Myanmar. Myanmar. Who are called the Karen people.

She told us some of the most. Grueling stories. Of their suffering for Christ. And they had been driven. From their traditional homeland. Up into the mountains. They were living hand to mouth. And they had almost no money.

To speak of. But they heard that Cox. Was coming to the States. And they had heard about Hurricane Katrina. And so. They all decided. To empty their pockets. Of all the coins they had.

Burmese. Kjet. And they insisted. On giving it to Baroness Cox. For the aid of the poor. These Americans. Who had suffered from Hurricane Katrina.

And of course. She at first declined. But they insisted. We want to participate. With our brothers. And sisters. And on the platform.

[20 : 34] She opened her hand. And there was the money. And it added up to something. Like 70 cents US. I tell you. It might have been worth 70 cents. In US. But it was worth. A lot more in heaven.

That's a gracious treasure. Right there. Don't get me wrong. And don't get the apostle wrong. He's not saying. We should become fanatics. And every time.

We hear a Christian appeal. For money. Give everything away. And put our families. Into poverty. And. The point is. That God's grace. Always leads. To sacrifice. It always leads.

To giving more. Than we are comfortable with. So first. True giving is joyful. Second. Sacrificial. And thirdly. It's voluntary. Verses 3 to 4.

Look at the end of verse 3. They gave their own accord. Verse 4. This is a dream. Verse 4. Begging us earnestly. For the favour.

[21 : 30] Of taking part. In the relief. Of the saints. There's no coercion. Or fundraising. From the apostle. He's not begging them. To give. They're begging him.

For the favour. Of participating. In the given. In giving. Like the Karen Christians. It's wonderful. Isn't it? I mean this. May the Lord. Deliver some Johns.

Forever. From nagging. Pastors. Who scold. Or shame. Or threaten. One commentator says.

He says. I must confess. That none of those approaches. Have ever stirred me to give. More than I planned to give. In fact. More than once. I gave less.

Echoing. Mark Twain. Who was so sickened. By a long appeal. For money in a church. Not only did he not give anything. To the appeal. He took a note. Out of the plate. As it passed him by.

[22 : 29] Go ahead. Did you see. The language here. Is personal connection. Language. You know. The favour. Of taking part. In relief. Favour.

Is grace. Taking part. Is fellowship. Koinonia. Relief. Is ministry. And this is how grace works. If we've received the grace of God.

It does give us a desire. To give. To take an initiative. And it gives us a desire. To take initiative. Not to those. Who've done stuff for us. Or will do stuff for us.

But to take initiative. Based on what Christ. Has already done for us. And don't you think. It's possible. Even after you've. Been living the Christian life. For a while. And you know. The grace of God.

To begin thinking. Of yourself. As a bit of a patron. And. It's a very thin line. Between that. And becoming patronizing. To others. So you're irritated. When you hear of a genuine need.

- [23 : 24] Or you're irritated. When you hear Bible teaching. On money. We always have to go back. To the grace of God. In Jesus Christ. Because only grace. Can make giving.
- Joyful. Sacrificial. And voluntary. And fourthly. If grace is working. In our lives. It's going to make giving. Vertical. I couldn't think of a better word.
- For this. Verse five. And this. Not as we expected. But they gave themselves. First. To the Lord. And then. By the will of God.
- To us. The most important thing. The Macedonians gave. Was not giving money. They dedicated themselves. To the risen Christ.
- And his work. And that always comes. That always ought to come. Before we give away. Otherwise. Then we are patronizing. You see.
- [24 : 18] In giving money. They gave themselves. That's why. Every time we meet here. We have an offertory. And the offertory. Is not you offer. A little bit of your money. To God.
- It's not even. You know. When the collection. Comes forward. We offer all our money. To God. The idea. Is meant to be. As Dan prayed today. That we offer ourselves. To God. First.
- And then this comes. Out of that. And no sooner. As Paul finished. With the Macedonians. He turns to the Corinthians. In verse 6. And he says. Finish what you started.
- Because I want you. Experience. The same grace. Verse 7. He says. You excel in everything. See that you excel. In this act of grace.
- And then verse 8. He says. I don't say it as a command. And we'll come to this next week. But to prove. By the earnestness. Of others. That your love. Also. Is genuine. Here is the fifth principle.
- [25 : 14] Of Christian giving. So far. And as if it's based on. The grace of God. Then it's going to be loving. Paul calls.
- The collection. A test. Of the Corinthians love. Now. Why is he held up. The Macedonians. As an example. He's not trying to. He's not trying to.
- Make a competition. He's not trying to. Create rivalry. You know what it'd be like. Let's compare. Our per capita giving. To the giving of. The Oak Ridge congregation.
- And that'd be awful. No. It either leads to pride. Or to guilt. Or to shame. No. He says. It's a test of love. So that you. Corinthians. Will be able to see.
- For yourselves. That you love Christ. Christ. You know. I can give away. All I have. I can give up. My body. To be burned.
- [26 : 09] But if I do not have love. I gain. Nothing. It's the grace of God. It's only the grace of God. That begins to replace. Our love for money. With our love for God.
- And for others. It's only the giving of Christ. On the cross. That frees me. From any domineering power. It's the ongoing forgiveness. And hope that we have in Christ.
- I thought this morning. You know. Maybe we should sing the offertory hymn. After the sermon. Not to change the amount. But so that we might practice. Some of these five things.
- Because. They're difficult. And they're ongoing. But in the end. God does not have a resources problem. He's building a people.
- Gripped by grace. He wants to dwell in us. He wants to show his glory through us. And he is gradually delivering us. From gods and powers. Including money. So that we become more like Jesus.
- [27 : 04] To each other. And to the world. And it all comes down to grace. And as grace takes root in our lives. Our lives become more joyful. Than they are conventional.

You start to live as though. Your treasure is really in heaven. And if you give in a planned way. Pray that it might be joyful. And sacrificial.

And voluntary. And vertical. And loving. And now. Let's kneel and pray. And let's approach the throne of grace. And ask for God's help together.

Thank you. Thank you.

laughter