

Gracious Living I

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[0 : 00] Dear God, you are graceful and good to us. These gifts we offer you are not from ourselves, but from you.

We give them back to you for the purposes of your kingdom. We ask now that you would meet us in your word preached this morning, that you would prepare our hearts to hear you and respond to you.

For your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, we're at the beginning of a very short sermon series.

We're going to be looking at Christian giving in 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9. And David's going to continue this next week and perhaps correct anything that I said.

That might not be right. But this is a passage, if you want to join me in 2 Corinthians 8, 1 through 9, that the title of the sermon is Gracious Living.

[1 : 07] And I want to say there seems to be to me something Martha Stewart-esque about that title. And I don't want to mislead you. There's nothing Martha Stewart-esque about this sermon. In fact, there's nothing like that about me either.

So, the passage doesn't have anything to do with tasteful living or transforming your home. But it does have to do with grace transforming your life.

It's very specifically, Paul teaches us that knowing the grace of God will cause you to give of yourself. And that will include giving your money in significant ways.

There is a transforming effect of God's grace on our lives. And I need to give you a background on these nine verses which have to do so much about God's grace.

What has happened is that the church in Jerusalem has been experiencing a lot of hardship. They had gone through a famine, a very severe famine that took place over several years.

[2 : 09] And before that, and during this time as well, Christians who had converted from being Jews were experiencing a certain amount of persecution. Many were losing their businesses.

Many were experiencing homes that were split because of this new faith that they had come into. And what had happened is that people who were particularly vulnerable in the church in Jerusalem were experiencing severe hardship.

They were poverty stricken. It was a time of distress for that church. And so what Paul did was he decided he would take up a collection. And so he went throughout the Gentile world.

And asked at all the churches for donations. Explaining how serious the situation was in Jerusalem where the Christian faith started. And not only was he doing this to address the needs of these fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

He was doing it also to express the unity that only God can give in Jesus Christ. A unity that would bring Jews and Gentiles who were far apart in every way in the world together.

[3 : 20] Together as one family. And that giving expressed that unity. Now the church in Corinth that Paul is writing to, this is a church that's in the middle of one of the richest cities in the world.

And they were having trouble in giving their full amount. In other words, they'd pledged something. But false teachers had come. They had called Paul's authority into question. And they were reluctant now to give their full amount.

Well, at the same time that this was happening, an unexpected good news happened. The poorer cities up north, the sort of the country cousins, this would be like in relation to Vancouver, it would be like the churches in Prince Rupert or Prince George and Fort St. John's.

Hearing about something happening up there. And what had happened absolutely astounded Paul. These churches gave far beyond expectations.

In fact, Paul wasn't even going to go to them for the collection. But they actually wanted to give. And they gave far beyond what was expected. And so part of the reason for the letter to Corinth is to encourage them to give by telling them about that astonishing giving of the other Christian churches.

[4 : 39] Now, it's not to shame the church in Corinth, although there might have been a certain amount of that. It's an example. Paul is showing an illustration here to them of how God's grace really transforms people and how that is shown in their giving.

Look at verse 1. This is how he puts it. He says, We want you to know, in other words, he's saying, it's very important, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God which has been shown, or in the original, which has been given in the churches of Macedonia.

And what he's saying here is that the Macedonians were participating in the grace of God when they gave money to the collection. What they were doing was actually expressing God's grace.

It wasn't just this act of giving. It was an act of God's own grace. And there are three striking attributes about that giving that really reveals that this is God's grace at work in their lives.

The first thing that was, look in verse 2. The first striking attribute is that it was a sacrificial giving. For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality.

[5 : 58] In other words, of generous giving on their part. You see the contrast here. Here are these people in these churches in Macedonia experiencing deep affliction and real poverty, the kind of grinding poverty that really weighs you down.

likely they were persecuted for their faith. They were experiencing financial hardship. They didn't know what their future was going to be. All because they were Christians. Now naturally, that would create a reluctance to give.

And we know that in our own life. When we go through difficult patches in our life, times of financial uncertainty, we tend to sort of curl in. We want to defend ourselves.

We become inward looking. And the last things the Macedonians would naturally want to do at this time is to give to a people far away who are Jewish, who are far away from them in many other ways, not just geographically, and who they'll never see.

There are people who used to look down on them. But here's where God's grace is. Because in contrast to their poverty, their giving, Paul says, is characterized by a deep joy, an abundance of joy, and a wealth of generosity.

[7 : 14] Isn't that amazing? They became actually outward looking in the midst of their hardship. Now they were likely taught about the Old Testament practice of giving 10% of their income.

But they had experienced that the gospel had freed them up not to be tied to a certain amount like that, but to be able at this time to exceed that amount, to make a collection that is outside their church, that has nothing to do with their church.

It can only be God's grace at work in a very powerful way. And the wonderful thing about it is the sacrifice isn't felt as, you know, a sacrifice in what we normally think of, something that is a burden.

They actually saw it as something that was a privilege, which we're going to see in a minute. I think a very good example of this is the life of John Wesley. There's lots of things written about John Wesley, but one of the things this famous preacher did was that he, as a young man, found that he could live on \$56 a year.

So he wasn't living in Vancouver. It was 250 years ago as well. But what John Wesley discovered is he could live on this, and he decided, as he grew older, to continue living at that amount.

[8 : 25] Well, you know John Wesley wrote lots of hymns that we sing here in church. He wrote lots of books as well, preached a lot. He sold a lot of books. He made thousands of pounds on it. And he continued to live to the rest of his life on \$56 a year.

And that giving, which would have looked very sacrificial by the end of his life, probably 90, 95% he's giving away, is never thought of in his biography, in his life, as being a hardship, as something that's a burden.

That kind of giving was a joy. He considered it to be a privilege. It was a sacrifice in the Christian sense of gladness in the giving. And that brings us to the second striking thing about these Macedonians' giving, is that they were incredibly enthusiastic about their giving.

So if you look at verse 3, for they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will. There was nothing coercion about this.

Begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints. Now I think this is what really floored Paul. You can imagine him going to all these different churches and at times probably having to beg and say, this fund is very, very important.

[9 : 45] So he was doing a certain amount of begging as he traveled. But here's a group that actually begs Paul. We want to give. We want to give to that fund. Do not hold us back from being able to contribute to that collection.

They begged him earnestly. And the way the Greek describes it, it says, instead of saying begging urgently for the favor, it's begging urgently for the grace of giving, of taking part in that collection.

They wanted to experience that grace. And that's why they were pleading with him. They had likely experienced the truth in their life of Jesus' words when he said, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

It seems as though they knew that blessing in their lives. And I wonder if you have experienced that blessing in your own life as well. I know that there are a number of people here who have that can talk about how God has given them grace as they have participated in that grace when they have given in significant ways.

We had a conversation about this, that we had a little Bible study on this in our pastoral staff meeting on Thursday. And what was supposed to be a 10-minute Bible study ended up being 45 minutes while our business got pushed to the side a bit.

[11 : 03] Because what happened is it struck a chord as we were reading this passage and a number of people on staff shared about the blessings that they had received as they committed themselves to giving to God's work consistently in a significant way and giving money significantly.

And I said to them, you know, I think you should give a testimony about that this morning on Sunday morning. And coincidentally, all of them are out of town this weekend for very, very good reasons.

But I think it would be great if they would and if people in our own congregation would as well. Because I know that people that I have talked to and I've experienced this as well have experienced God's blessing as they have given significantly that included a real deepening of their trust in God.

In other words, they have found that they have had to really rely on Him more, to be more dependent upon Him in their lives as they have given in significant ways. They've also experienced the wonder of God meeting their needs.

You know, if one gives in a way where you sacrifice something, sometimes when there's difficulty that comes up, you're less prepared in some ways. But in those times, and we talked about this in our staff meeting, there are many, many examples of God giving to us unexpectedly.

[12 : 20] Also, people experience a deeper connection to the church or to people outside the church in the giving, in Christian giving. And that's why in the Bible, often fellowship is combined with money, that understanding of fellowship.

And I know that we have experienced, people who have experienced giving to Malawi and to the diocese there, are experiencing a strengthening of their relationship with those people.

There is a real relational aspect to giving. You have a stronger connection with those to whom you are giving. And I think that leads into another blessing that people talk about in that it deepens their joy in the work of the gospel.

You feel in that kind of giving that you have a greater stake in what God is doing in this world and in this church of St. John's. There is a sense that I am part of God's grace being worked out through this congregation.

And that is a blessing. And these may have been some of the ways Macedonia participated in God's grace. And there may have been other blessings as well that really made them plead, I want to be part of that grace of giving.

[13 : 33] Well, the third very striking thing, besides their giving being sacrificial and enthusiastic, is that their giving is actually understood as worship. There's a very spiritual aspect to their understanding of giving.

So look at verse 5. You know, it talks about them giving not as expected, but first, they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

You see what that's saying? They're saying that in giving money to fellow Christians, they were giving themselves to the Lord Jesus. They were worshiping Him. And so their giving is not a calculation of how much they could afford or whether it interfered with other big bills.

It actually all has to do with their relationship with Jesus, first of all. They feel as though they are responding directly to Him as they give in a Christian way.

And that's the right way for us to understand our own giving as well. You know, it's not like a charity in which we are doing it for humanitarian causes, although that is a very good thing.

[14 : 42] But Christian giving, the kind of thing that's being described here, has everything to do with our relationship with God. It's actually an expression of our entrusting of our lives to God.

And it's also a very natural expression of gratitude. We're giving back to God what is already His. That's what Sean was talking about with that toonie. I hope you're giving more than that, Sean, in your collection.

But anyway, this is something that is a part of their giving of their lives to God. It's an expression of it. And that's why Paul writes this section of the letter. It's not because he wants to increase the collection, because he wants it to be very impressive.

It's because he's concerned with the spiritual health of the Corinthians. He's concerned that they might be missing out on a vital aspect of Christian living if they don't give.

Don't miss out on the blessing, is what he's saying. And it's very interesting that in all of this talk about a collection of money, Paul, in these nine verses, never mentions the word money.

[15 : 48] That's quite a gift. How do you do that? He is raising money and not once talking about money. He talks about the wealth of liberality or generosity. He talks about giving and taking part in the relief of saints.

And in verses six and seven, in a great way, he talks about this gracious work. You know, in the original, it's this act of grace. And he's not so much interested, therefore, in amounts of money.

He's looking at the attitude of the heart. This is what he is about. He's looking at the attitude of the heart. And he's asking, do the Corinthians have generous hearts?

Are they enthusiastic in their giving? Do they see it as worship? Do they know how to give sacrificially? And that's why he tells them in verse eight, if you look down there.

He says, I don't say this as a command. You know, I'm not saying you have to give. We've got to meet our budget. We're in big trouble otherwise. He says, it's not a command, but to prove the earnestness of others, by the earnestness of others, talking about the Macedonians, that your love also is genuine.

[16 : 55] You see, you can't, he wants them to give as a way of confirming and making public their love for Christ and for fellow Christians. It's a matter of the heart, he's saying.

You can't pressure people into Christian graceful giving. It's an expression of their love. It comes from knowing that you participate in God's work of grace when you give.

It says that you are realizing that God has brought you into relationship with brothers and sisters in Christ. And wonderfully, this is why the passage ends with a very powerful verse about grace in verse 9.

I think it would be good for us to write this on a piece of paper and put it on our refrigerators because this is what transforms us. This is what changes our hearts and gives us joyous, worshipful, generous attitudes towards giving.

It's this. He says, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich.

[18 : 02] You see what that is saying? If you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior today, you are rich. And it doesn't matter what your bank accounts look like or what your investments look like, which I'm very comforted by, you are rich.

You have a new life in Jesus and your future is secure in him. This is what the Macedonians knew. You know God as your Heavenly Father and you have now and forever the forgiveness of sins and peace with God.

And that only takes place because Jesus has given extravagantly. He became poor for you. Now I found out this week that my son is actually a theologian.

He's three years old and I don't know what Catherine's been teaching him but he was talking about Christmas coming already. Surprise, surprise. And he was talking about presents and so forth and so I wanted to redirect him and say, do you know whose birthday Christmas is?

And he said, it's Jesus' birthday. I said, right. So that's good. That's the end of the conversation. But then all of a sudden out of the blue he said, Jesus was big and then he became a baby.

[19 : 13] And that's a very interesting thing to say. Jesus was big and then he was a baby because that is what Paul is saying here. Jesus was big. Philippians tells us that he was equal to God and he is and that he had every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Yet what he decided to do was to empty himself and serve us by dying for us that we might become rich, that we might receive everything that heaven can offer.

Well, this is the powerful grace that surrounds us and sustains us and gives us joy. The joy we take from that grace is what Paul is saying ought to transform us and create in us hearts that want to give, to express it, to express our love.

We live in a culture that preaches continually against grace. You know that. This is part of what we're sort of wired towards because we believe we deserve everything we have and that we give only what others deserve to receive from us.

That's a basic mindset that is around us. We deserve what we have. We only give to people that deserve it. This is the belief system. But the grace of Jesus turns all of that upside down so that we get everything that we don't deserve and we give because it is a privilege, because it is taking part in God's own grace.

[20 : 39] It is our worship. It is our act of praise. And so it's good for us to end with verse 7. It's the application that Paul gives to us.

And he says, he applies this to Corinth and to all of, and to our church as well. He says, now as you excel in everything, in faith, in utterance, in knowledge, in all earnestness, in your love for us, in other words, as you excel in preaching and teaching and evangelism and loving fellowship, he's saying, I want you also to excel in the grace of giving.

You may not have thought of that before. I want you also to excel in this gracious work also. And that is what our prayer today is as we hear this message, that God may help us by his grace to help us to excel in the grace of giving, in the acts of grace that God has given us to do.

May we know in a profound way the blessings that come as we give of ourselves in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.