

Act of Grace

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Date: 24 January 2016

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[0 : 0 0] Hello. Hi everybody. I just want to say welcome as well to add mine to Jordan's. My name is Aaron. Jordan and I look after this service. If I haven't met you, wonderful, wonderful to have you here. Come and say hi afterwards. Right, so after that fantastic short sermon series in Jonah, we're going to go back to 2 Corinthians which we looked at last year. And so we'll finish off 2 Corinthians leading up to Easter. Now you remember, we got up to about chapter 7 and up until this point what had happened was, so Paul was addressing this particular issue, or several issues. One of them was this, is that he'd started this church and these fairly dodgy religious leaders had come in, super apostles they call themselves, and they had, they'd changed the gospel. They'd made it way more sort of flashy I guess.

And so as Paul is, Paul visited them, there was this big kind of public, I'd say New Zealand would call it argy-bargy, like a bit of a kind of a, like you know, what do you call it here? Like a showdown. Yeah, like a showdown. Yeah, like a showdown, right? So there's a showdown. And the church didn't do much about it, didn't, didn't kind of, didn't support Paul. So he wrote this letter called the severe letter, or the angry letter. And we don't have it, that was, I guess that was the second letter he wrote to Corinthians. We don't have that letter, which is good, because it will probably be our favourite letter. We probably quote it all the time. Jordan had come into the office, does it not say in angry Corinthians chapter 2, you know, something like that. Anyway, so he wrote this letter, and that sort of sorted out the situation mostly. So a lot of the church kind of repented and came back on board.

So up till chapter 7, Paul has been encouraging the mostly sort of repentant people, which is positive. But there's this kind of very naughty little minority in the church that was still questioning the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry there, thinking that Paul was a bit of a loser, that he wasn't flashy enough. And so Paul has been addressing that as well.

Now, chapters 10 to 13 deal with a different topic, and we have these two chapters in the middle, chapters 8 and 9. And this is a new topic. He's like this kind of, he turns a corner and he goes, okay, I want to talk about something else. And you need a bit of background to understand what's going on here. So the Christians in Jerusalem, so this is not in Jerusalem, right?

This is, he's talking to Christians in Corinth, obviously. But there's these churches in Jerusalem who are very, very, very poor. And no social services back in the days. And Paul wanted to take up an offering for them. So he's visiting all his churches and writing to them saying, I'm going to take up this offering to support this church, which is a very important place, but they've got nothing. And his goal is by the time he goes back to Corinth, which will be his third visit to Corinth. When he arrives there, he wants the church to have put aside the full amount of money they're going to give to this very impoverished church in Jerusalem.

[3 : 1 6] So it's just, you know, it's a wonderful project. The early church, the early Christians were actually great givers in general, fabulous givers in general. They found a letter a while ago written by a Roman emperor with a very interesting name, Monica. His moniker was Emperor Julian the Apostate. So straight away, you know, he's a pretty stand-up kind of guy. Julian the Apostate.

So Julian wrote a letter to his pagan priests. He wasn't a Christian. He wrote a letter to all the priests in his pagan temples, talking about the abundance of Christian charity, because it was famous. And let me just give you a little quote from that letter here. He says, The impious Galileans, he's referring to Christians there, the impious Galileans relieve both their own poor and ours. It is shameful that ours should be so destitute of our assistance.

The fame and character of Christian giving had become an embarrassment to the empire. So the early churches were actually great givers. Wow. Not all the churches.

The Corinthian church, easily the wealthiest of all Paul's churches, they were a little bit slack. Hence this letter. So Paul had communicated to Titus that this offering was going to be taken up.

Verse 6 talks about that. And you can also refer back to one, Corinthians 16, I believe, it talks about this offering. So the Corinthians had sort of started maybe talking about doing an offering, but they'd completely slacked off and stopped, right? So Paul spends two chapters saying to them, listen, it's time to get this going again. You know, I really want to take up this offering for these poor Christians in Jerusalem. Now, how does he do that? How does he address the very prickly issue of money? Well, I'll tell you what he doesn't do. He doesn't demand that they give.

[5 : 24] You see that? He says, you know, this is not a command. He doesn't strong arm them. He doesn't sort of come down, bring in his big, you know, apostolic hammer down on top of them. I'm the apostle. It's your duty.

He doesn't play the boss card. Every now and then, my boss, who was the rector, when we have meetings, he's very dialogical on his approach to management, but he will say, I'm just going to put my rector's hat on for a moment. And at that point, you know, whatever he says, that's what we're going to do.

I appreciate that. Paul doesn't do that here, actually. He doesn't, he isn't strong on them. Tell you what else he doesn't do. He doesn't manipulate them. He doesn't put pressure sort of on their, on their emotions. He doesn't sort of tell them all these stories about how much the poor are suffering and how much more the Corinthian church has than the suffering church in Jerusalem. He doesn't do that either. I mean, that would be a fairly easy thing to do, right? So he doesn't strong arm them. He doesn't manipulate them. He doesn't trick them either. When I first came to North America, uh, 10 and a half years ago, I used to watch a lot of tele evangelists on TV. Uh, I found, I found them fascinating, just fascinating. In the same way, I, you sort of slow down for a car wreck, that kind of fascinating, you know, there's a car accident and you kind of slow down, you go, oh, that's, that's so terrible. That's so terrible. I kind of want to know what's going on there, you know?

So it was the same, it was the same situation. I was so fascinated by this, this phenomenon of tele evangelists. And, uh, a lot of these men and women had something in common. One of their tricks, really was a trick, was this, that they would talk about, uh, seed money, seed money. Perhaps you've heard of that seed money. And the basic just was this, their theology was this. I don't think it's actually the theology. I think it's just like a way of tricking people who don't, uh, know better to give. But the, the, the basic just was this. If you give God a little bit of money or a big bit of money, uh, he will work it so that somehow you get a whole lot of money back somehow. And they've all got the same pitch. It's seed money, seed money, seed money. Uh, so they have lines like this, sow a seed of faith, reap a harvest of blessing. Uh, if you have a need, sow a seed. That's quite a good one, I thought actually. And because it rhymes, right? Uh, now obviously, see, watch these guys.

It's astounding what the, some of the stuff they do. Like they'll even have little products, like a little prayer hanky thing. And, uh, miracle water is a, is a popular one with one guy, Peter Popoff, I think. His name is Peter Popoff. I know it's a great name, right? Peter Popoff. And, uh, he'll say, I'll send you this. And you pour this little thing of water on whatever's like your credit card or your checkbook or something. And somebody will send you money. But you have to send me like a thousand dollars or a hundred dollars. Now it is obviously, uh, it's heresy. It's complete heresy. And it's, uh, these men and women have, many of them have become very wealthy off the back of that heresy.

[8 : 40] I get really angry about it. I'm comforted though to know that these men and women will face God one day and make an account for their lives. So Paul and his fundraising drive, he doesn't strong arm them.

He doesn't manipulate them with stories of sad stories. He doesn't trick them with false hopes about you give a dollar, you'll get a hundred back. Here's, here's what he does.

Well, he does two things actually. First thing is he gives them the example of another church. You see that in the first few verses there. Second thing he does is he gives them the example of Christ. So that's the sermon basically. Two examples, example of another church, example of Jesus. So first he brings them the example of the Macedonian. So this is, if Corinth is, if this is like this massive peninsula you can imagine, right? And Corinth is down here, Macedonia is kind of up here.

And it includes churches like the church in Thessalonica and Philippi. So these particular churches were quite poor, this Macedonian church. They were very poor. And in the midst of some type of persecution, it says in verse two there, and there is a great contrast between the Corinthian church and the Macedonians. It's pretty stark. The Corinthians were a wealthy church and they'd agreed to give, but floundered. The Macedonians were poor, but had asked for the privilege of giving. They'd requested the privilege. Verse four, they begged us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints. So it sounds like there's a bit of backstory here and it's probably something like this.

Well, we won't ask the Macedonian church because they've got nothing and that wouldn't be fair. They've got their own problems. No one had an expectation they could be part of this offering, but this church desperately wanted to participate. And they begged, please let us participate. Let us give. Let us give to our brothers in Jerusalem, our sisters in Jerusalem. It doesn't say how much they gave, but we do know verse three there that they gave according to their means and beyond it. So they gave beyond anyone's expectations. So there's probably an expectation about how much they would give beyond that. Isn't that wonderful? Here's the big question though, why? What would produce that kind of response in a community?

[11 : 05] What causes these poor rural Gentile Christians, afflicted Christians, what caused them to beg for the opportunity to sacrificially give to poor Christian Jews in Jerusalem? People who they're most likely would never meet. Well, again, we know it's not manipulation because it says in verse three, they gave of their own accord. Where did this radical generosity come from? It says in verse two and verse five, look at this. Verse two, their abundance of joy and extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity. In verse five, they gave themselves first to the Lord. It's like this chemical explosion. In the midst of their poverty, they knew where real joy came from. And this explodes in generosity. And the source of that joy is explained in verse nine. And this is the second part of the sermon explained in verse nine. For 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. This Macedonian church, they seem to understand the gospel in a way that the Corinthians didn't understand it. And it resulted in this, just this outrageous generosity. Let's have a closer look at this verse nine, because this is, you've heard this verse before, right? This is John 3.16 stuff. This is fantastic.

Here's what Paul is trying to get across here. Though he became rich, for our sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

This is, I call this the great exchange. A great exchange took place when Jesus was born and when he died. Paul, using the language of money, explains the gospel like this. Christ who was rich became poor, so that we who are poor can become rich. Rich Christ, that's pre-existent Christ, king of the universe, eternal with the father. Rich, rich, rich, right? Became a baby, in a feeding trough, lived a hard life, and was crucified, a criminal's death, one of the worst ways to die. Christ became poor, so that we who are poor as a result of our sin might become spiritually rich. So our badness, to put it sort of real basically, was exchanged for Christ's goodness. That means that when God sees you, he sees the righteousness of Christ. That's the great exchange, and what a wonderful thing.

For those of you who are trapped in some sense of guilt in your life, or whatever it is, do you know that? Do you know that when Christ looks at you, that you have the righteousness of Christ? That's good news, right? That's the great exchange. So the Macedonians knew this, and it changed the way they thought about money. And Paul brings us up to say to the Corinthian church, he says to them, guys, I want you to think about the costly grace, this costly grace. Think on this grace until it becomes the center of who you are, and it has changed your heart, that Christ became poor, so we might become rich. You see, Paul knew that. The solution to the Corinthian stinginess was not strong-arm them and then give them a percentage that they should give.

The solution to the Corinthian stinginess was not tell them sad stories about poverty. The solution to stinginess was a reorientation of their heart to the generosity of Christ, who poured out all of his wealth, who poured out all of his status, who poured out his whole life for us. Paul knows that. He knows that when our hearts are fixed on that truth, on that reality, that gospel, everything changes. Everything changes, including our relationship with our wallet, our bank account. When our hearts are fixed on the gospel, what happens? We can become people who are generous and joyful in that generosity. We can become people who don't have to fret about money so much. A gospel-focused life is a life that doesn't envy other people's wealth, and nor does it ascribe value to a person based on their income. A gospel-focused life is marked by generosity, and this is so important, because the treasures of this world, especially money, the treasures of this world, especially money, it can put its hooks deep into our heart, deep into our hearts.

[16 : 05] And that's a terrible idol, money. It is a terrible thing to give your life to. That idol can't forgive you. It can't give you a fresh start. It can't do what Christ can do. And the only way that you can be free is to know a greater treasure. Folks, that's the only solution. You must know a greater treasure in your life, and there is none greater than the gospel. And that's what Paul does. He wants to take up an offering. What does he do? He points them to Jesus, to salvation, the salvation that was brought for us. Let me finish here. When you have to give at church, when the offering comes around, or to Christian work, missionaries, whatever, a parachurch organization, when you have to give, this is my advice to you, don't pull out your calculator and calculate how much you should give. Because for some of you, you'll come up with a figure, right? For some of you, 10%, that's way too little for some of you.

5% is going to be way too much for some of you. So no, no calculators. Folks, what Paul is teaching us here is that when it comes to giving, go to the cross, consider the gospel, and then prayerfully decide. That's it. That's my sermon. It's short. I know. We have two more weeks to talk about money.

But if you do have questions after this sermon, because I know it's a tricky thing, right? I'd love to chat to you about it afterwards. Amen.