

August 1, 2021

HOW GIVING WORKS IN THE LIFE OF A BELIEVER

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

(17 of 22 in a series through 2 Corinthians)

No doubt there are times in our lives where we come across a command concerning holiness, and we feel conviction. Perhaps we read Hebrews 12:14 where the author tells us, “Strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord,” and we think, “I need to examine my life and make sure I’m walking in holiness.” That is absolutely an appropriate response. But in those moments, what comes to our minds? In other words, as we examine our lives to make sure we’re striving for holiness, what areas are we examining? Perhaps areas of lust or gossip, maybe whether we’re developing a consistent pattern of prayer or meditation on the Scripture, or it could be that we’re asking whether we’re chasing prestige or glory. Those are all good things to examine when it comes to holiness. But I wonder how many of us in those moments examine ourselves to see if we’re striving for holiness in regards to our giving?

My guess is that giving is not necessarily what comes to our minds when we consider holiness. But if it’s an area that we’re tempted to ignore, it’s not because the Bible is silent on the subject. Many have noted that Jesus talked about money more than almost any other single topic. And in our text today—which is about giving—Paul explicitly tells us that as believers we should seek to excel in this area of obedience to the Lord. We see it right in the middle of our text (in which he refers to our giving as “grace” or an “act of grace”). He writes, “But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also” (v. 7). That is, just as you and I seek to grow as believers in faith, in how we talk, in our knowledge of God and his Word, in our zeal and love, so also Paul says that each of us should seek to excel in giving as well. We’re going to see in a few weeks as we get to chapter 9 that “God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7), which is a reminder that our hearts should be so shaped by the Lord that we find giving to be a joy.

And it’s fair to examine ourselves this morning and see if this describes us. I’ve mentioned that sexual immorality seems to be the great threat to our holiness in the present day because of the fact that inappropriate material can be streamed into our homes or onto devices that we carry around with us so easily. But I wonder if it isn’t our service to money that might be a bigger threat. After all, Jesus singled out money when he said that no one can serve two masters and then followed that up by saying, “You cannot serve God and money” (Matt 6:24). In a text where so many things could have been contrasted with service to God, Jesus chose to speak of money. And perhaps it’s because the absence of a cheerful giving heart is easy to ignore and not feel a need to grow in. I imagine most of us have had someone in our lives with whom we’ve wanted to be vulnerable in terms of our pursuit of holiness. Perhaps you wanted someone to ask you the difficult questions about what you’ve watched, how you’ve spoken, etc. That’s great. But I wonder if any of us have someone in our lives with whom we’ve unveiled our budget (our spending) because we want to make sure that it reflects that we are a cheerful giver?

But at this point you're probably wondering, why in the world we are talking about this? Well, we're looking at this topic this morning—and we'll continue to in the next two messages in 2 Corinthians—because Paul dives into the topic of giving in 2 Corinthians 8-9, and we're looking at the first portion of that this morning. But why does Paul dive into the topic of giving when this hasn't been a subject at all in the first seven chapters of this letter? Paul has been defending his ministry so that the Corinthians would listen to him instead of writing him off. And it has culminated in the text we looked at last (7:2-16) where Paul rejoices in the fact that the Corinthians had responded to a letter delivered by Titus with repentance. Paul had avoided visiting them a second time, but now he had received news that the great majority of the church loved him, were eager to see him, and he could come visit them again, knowing that it would be a joyful visit. And so Paul decides to launch into the topic of giving?

Well, let me explain. At the time that Paul was ministering all over the world, the church back in Jerusalem was facing hard times financially. We're not entirely sure why. It may be because of a famine (Acts 11:27-30) or because of the persecution the believers were facing. But whatever the cause, Paul had decided to ask the churches with whom he was working in the Gentile world to give to the church in Jerusalem. After all, the church in Jerusalem had been responsible for the gospel going forth. Well, the church at Corinth had been included in that. We know from 1 Corinthians 16:1-5 that Paul had directed the church to put aside some money each week, and then when he came to visit them after passing through Macedonia, he'd get the collection and make sure it got to Jerusalem. And we've gone over a few times throughout our study of this letter that this planned visit got interrupted after Paul visited on his way to Macedonia and it was such an unpleasant visit that he decided to delay visiting a second time. Consequently, this collection was put on hold. But after Paul has received word that they're repentant, love him, and are eager to see him, he's going to come visit, and part of the visit is going to be to get that collection of money so that he can take it to the church at Jerusalem.

But there's a problem. He's coming from Macedonia, and the believers there have given to this collection in an extraordinary way. The way Paul says it is that "their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means . . . and beyond their means" (vv. 2-3). In other words, though they were extremely poor, they gave what you might think a reasonable percentage of their income, and they gave what you might think unreasonable, maybe even an amount someone would deem unwise. But their hearts had been arrested by the Lord, so there was no holding them back. Now, you might ask? Wait, why is that a problem? Here's why? Because Paul tells the Corinthians in chapter 9 that some of the Macedonians might come with him to Corinth, and he's been bragging about how the Corinthians were also eager to give, have been storing up a collection, etc. So Paul says, "If some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident" (9:4). And so Paul is writing about this collection in chapters 8-9 to get this (now repentant) church ready to give to the collection. That's why Paul starts talking about giving in chapters 8-9.

So, then, if we're talking about being giving as believers, what does that look like? I want to answer that question over these next three sermons, and so this morning we just want to get us

started on this topic. But I'll go ahead and acknowledge that there is a gap between our particular situation and the one in the text. When we give to the work of the Lord, it isn't going to help another specific church whose people are facing hardship, necessarily—though I hope we can see that all of the money that is given to the church is given toward the end of laboring to obey the Great Commission. But though our situation is a bit different than the specific one here, we can learn some principles about how giving works in the life of a believer. And I want to note a few of those principles of what giving in and how it works in our lives this morning. First, giving is an act *of* grace and a response *to* grace.

Giving is an act *of* grace and a response *to* grace

Paul launches into the discussion about the Corinthians getting the collection together by first talking about the example of the Macedonians in their giving. He writes, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia" (v. 15). And I want to stop here—before looking at the way they gave—just to look at the description Paul uses here. He doesn't say that he wants the Corinthians to know about the financial gift given by the Macedonians or the money given by them. He describes their gift as "the grace of God." And Paul doesn't just do this once. Later, he writes, "Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this . . ." Now, you might expect him to say, "Complete among you this financial collection to give to Jerusalem." That's certainly what he means. But he says, "Complete among you this *act of grace*" (v. 6). Then, in verse 7 he again tells them to excel in this "act of grace." In other words, as you and I give, we're passing on (or giving) grace.

And this makes sense if you think about it. When we give, we're not paying out what we owe. There's a reason why you don't refer to your mortgage payment as giving or an act of grace. It isn't grace; it's duty. You owe that money. There's a penalty if you don't pay it. But when you give, you're involving yourself in an act of grace—bestowing a gift. But there's more. Paul doesn't stop there. Later, when he grounds why they should give, he says, "For 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" (v. 9). This is obviously a reference to the Son of God taking on a human nature so that he might take the form of a servant and die for us. And it rounds out the picture Paul envisions.

If we know Christ, we have been recipients of incredibly rich, divine grace. The "grace of our Lord Jesus," is how Paul sums up the redeeming work of Christ. Therefore, as those who have been shown such grace, we rightly show grace to others. Or, we might say, to those who have been given so much in Christ, we naturally give as well. If we're not givers it may well indicate that we've never fully realized what we've been given in Christ. We are givers only because we've first been given to, and we only give what we've first been given. If we understand the Lord's grace, we will show that by the act of grace that is giving. Thus giving is an act of grace, and a response to grace.

Giving overflows from a heart that loves the Lord and his people

It's also clear in these verses that giving overflows from a heart that loves the Lord and his people. Paul bends over backwards to show that he's not wanting anyone to operate under compulsion. First, he shows that the Macedonians didn't give under compulsion. Here's how Paul describes their giving. He writes, "For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, *of their own accord*, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (vv. 2-4). Clearly Paul stresses that no one was strong-arming the Macedonians to give. They gave of their own accord, in fact, begging Paul to let them partake in this act of giving. Moreover, though quite poor, they gave more than Paul expected they might or could. Again, clearly this wasn't compulsion.

Then Paul reiterates to the Corinthians that he's not commanding them in some compulsory way. He tells them that he'd urged Titus to have them get the collection together (v. 6), and he exhorts them to seek to excel in giving (v. 7), but then he says in verse 8, "I say this not as a command." So, again, clearly, Paul does not want them to give under compulsion.

So, why then—if not by compulsion—did the Macedonians give? And how then—if not by compulsion—were the Corinthians to give? I think the answer is the same in each case, but let's start with the Macedonians. The Macedonians gave because their hearts had been arrested by God. They had an "abundance of joy" (v. 2) that led them to plead with Paul to get in on giving to the saints in Jerusalem. Moreover, they gave themselves to the Lord. Paul says of their giving that it was not as he expected (it was much more!) and then he adds, "But they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us" (v. 5). In other words, their inclination to get on board with giving to the saints in Jerusalem stemmed from being utterly devoted to the Lord. They knew what Christ had done for them. They knew God's love for them, and so they gave themselves in love to him and found so much joy in him that the opportunity to give bubbled up inside of them until it overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

Similarly, Paul says of the Corinthians in verse 8, "I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine." When Paul refers to the earnestness of others he's referring to the Macedonians. You might translate this as "by mentioning the eagerness shown by others I am seeking to verify the reality of your own love as well."¹ That is to say, he's mentioning what motivated the Macedonians so that the same motivating love might be shown by the Corinthians as well. This means that Paul pictures what motivated the Macedonians to give would also motivate the Corinthians in their giving. And here he specifically mentions love.

Therefore, we might say that when we devote ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord so that we delight in his love for us, it produces both an abundance of joy and a love that overflows both

¹ This is Murray Harris's translation. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 575.

toward our Lord and his people that shows itself in the grace of giving. I think we understand this as we think about singing. Haven't you been so overwhelmed by realizing who God is and what he has done for us in Christ that you feel that what is stirring in your heart has to overflow and come out? And so you sing loudly and maybe even shed tears. We might say in that moment that an abundance of joy and love overflow in praise to God in singing. Well, Paul is simply making the point that the same thing should happen in giving. Just as you can't imagine holding back your singing in those moments or containing your tears, so the Macedonians ended up both begging Paul to let them give and then gave more than anyone thought possible. And so we can say that giving overflows from a hearts that loves the Lord and his people. And finally we can add that giving shows our trust in the Lord.

Giving shows our trust in the Lord

In the first portion of our text, we can see that Paul has been motivating the Corinthians. He's held up the example of the Macedonians as a picture of what giving is and what drives and motivates us. He's told them that he'd love to see the same thing in them and pointed them to the grace that we've all been shown in Christ. But in this last section of our text (vv. 10-15), Paul begins to explain the dynamics of exactly what he's asking the Corinthians to do. In verses 10-11, he reminds them that they'd started this collection a year ago out of their own desire, and now he encourages them to finish it. In verse 12 he tells them that he's not asking them to give what they don't have but simply what they have. His request is not beyond their ability. In verses 13-14 he corrects a misconception they might have that he simply wants them to be the ones burdened while others are eased. The reality, rather, is that the saints in Jerusalem have legitimate need, and the Corinthians have the ability to help ease that need. And, if they hesitate, it would good to remember that the saints in Jerusalem were the ones who took were responsible for helping make sure that the gospel was being heralded all over the world. In fact, when Paul had been introduced to the apostles by Barnabas, Paul tells us in Galatians 2:9-10, "They gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." In other words, as Paul and Barnabas were sent out from Jerusalem on that occasion, they were encouraged to take the gospel to the Gentiles (such as the Corinthians), only they reminded Paul not to forget those poor believers in need. Now, Paul reminds the Corinthians, that they are the beneficiaries of that gospel going out, and the poor happen to be the saints in Jerusalem. In other words, this is a matter of fairness. And then he quotes from Exodus 16:18, saying, "As it is written, 'Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack'" (v. 15).

Now, the context of this quote is the Lord providing food for the Israelites in the wilderness. The Lord would provide manna from heaven, and each gathered what he needed. Some gathered much and others gathered little—according to their need. And those who gathered much (i.e. larger families) had nothing left over. They had exactly what they needed. And those who gathered little (i.e. smaller families) had no lack. Again, they had exactly what they needed.

It seems to me then that Paul's last note here is a reminder that the Lord can be trusted to care for his people. That's precisely what he did by sending manna in the wilderness. But now Paul is reminding the Corinthians of the same. There may be a time that the Corinthians have need, but their giving now won't leave them high and dry then. The one who gave precisely the amount of manna needed for each Israelite family knows how to care for his people. And interestingly the means the Lord may well use to do it is through the generosity of those who are benefitting now.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to trust the Lord. And perhaps we all claim that we do. But one of the clearest ways to make that evident is through our giving. And so my prayer for us as a people is that it might be said of us that because we know we are recipients of God's grace, we find ourselves eager to pass on that grace in giving. Because we have given ourselves to our Lord and rest in his love for us, we overflow in love through giving. And because we trust our Lord, we find rest in giving so that he might meet the needs of others and trust that he will care for us along the way. As one of your pastors, I want to make clear in a message like this, that my greatest concern for us is not that we would easily meet our budget or that we'd have money to build a new sanctuary, it is that we'd would manifest through our giving that we have been shaped by the grace of God, overflow with his love, and are trusting our Lord as we give. And how could we not when he's already given his Son to live, die, and be raised for us. So let's remember his love now as we come to the table. Amen.