

# Generous

## What Does Generosity Look Like? \* 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

Go ahead and take your Bibles and turn with me to 2 Corinthians 8. Today we are on week two of a four-week series on generosity from 2 Corinthians 8 & 9.

I want to give you a heads up, as you turn, that after the message today we are going to have a 2<sup>nd</sup> offering, but it is going to be very different than any offering you have ever experienced. It's actually going to be a lot of fun and you are probably going to have a hard time believing what we are giving you the opportunity to do. Do I have your curiosity piqued? Well, you will just have to wait a few minutes to see what that is all about.

Our text for today is 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, but just to get the full picture let's read verses 1-9. The Word of God says:

*We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, **2** 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. **3** For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, **4** begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—**5** and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. **6** Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. **7** 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. **8** I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. **9** 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. (2 Corinthians 8:1-9, ESV)*

To help set the stage for our study of this passage, let me remind you of a couple of things we talked about last week.

First, we need to remember the context of what is going on here in 2 Corinthians 8. Paul is writing to the church at Corinth and encouraging them to complete an offering to meet the needs of the poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem. He is doing so by giving them two examples of generosity. Last week we looked at the example of Jesus, and today we are going to study the example of the Macedonian Christians.

The second thing we need to remember from last week is that generosity is about the gospel. It's about the fact that Jesus became poor so that we might become rich. As I said last week, this is the most important thing you will ever hear about money. We will know what to do with our money, when, and only when we understand what Jesus has done for us.

This really is the main point of 2 Corinthians 8-9, and the main point of this entire series. And it's actually pretty easy to see in our passage today. Let me show you. Today we are going to pretty much walk word by word through the first 5 verses of 2 Corinthians 8, so make sure you have your Bible in front of you. Look at verse 1, Paul says he wants the Corinthians to know about what? About the grace of God, specifically in regard to giving. Then look at verse 6. Paul wants the example of the grace shown to and through the Macedonians to lead the Corinthians to also show what? Grace, specifically in regard to giving. And then in verse 9, Paul says that the Corinthian's act of grace should spring from the fact that they know the what of Jesus? The grace of Jesus in becoming poor so that they might become rich. This passage is about grace – God's generosity both to and through us – from beginning to end.

Now, last week we talked about the generosity of Jesus. And we will certainly touch on that again today. But what I want to focus on this morning is the example the Macedonians set in regards to what generosity looks like. The Macedonians provide us with a great example of how God's grace not only works in us but also through us. Hopefully by this point we understand that the result of truly understanding and experiencing God's generosity is that we become generous people. However, that leaves us with the question of exactly what generosity looks like. The great thing

about this is that in our passage today we have what is perhaps the best example of human generosity in the entire Bible. Since this is the case, look with me now at four characteristics of generosity displayed by the Macedonians.

## **Four Characteristics of Generosity**

### **1. Generosity is independent of circumstances. (v. 2)**

Number one, generosity is independent of circumstances. We have to get this in our heads right from the beginning. Right now some of you are struggling not to shut down on me because you think your current circumstances prevent you from being generous. You think because you are in debt or your income is very limited you can't be generous. Listen, I can tell you confidently from God's Word that this is not the case. Look at verses 1-2:

*We want you to know brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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.*

As I said last week, verse 2 is one of the more amazing verses in Scripture. Despite being severely persecuted and extremely poor, the Macedonian Christians were extremely generous. In other words, they were able to be generous despite their circumstances.

The churches Paul is talking about here are the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. The book of Acts repeatedly describes the suffering endured by these churches, mostly at the hands of Jews who fiercely opposed the gospel. Paul also referred to their persecution numerous times in his letters, including in 1 Thessalonians 1:

*And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 1:6, ESV)*

The word affliction both here in 1 Thessalonians 1 and in 2 Corinthians 8 refers to great pressure, as in the crushing of grapes. This pressure would have included the loss of family relationships, jobs, and perhaps even facing physical danger and imprisonment.

In conjunction with these trials, the Macedonians were dirt-poor. To be honest, I think it is almost impossible for us to relate to their kind of poverty. If you have traveled in the developing world you may have viewed this kind of poverty, but you probably haven't actually experienced it. I have had the privilege to travel all around the world and have witnessed some of the poorest people on earth. Ten years ago I was in Sierra Leone at the time it was ranked the worst place in the world to live. But while I have seen extreme poverty, I have never actually experienced it myself.

For most of us being poor means being unable to go on the vacation we want to go on. Perhaps if we are really bad off it means we can't go out to eat or buy a new set of shoes or clothes *right now*. But that is not the kind of poverty in view here. In fact, the term in verses 2 describes those with almost nothing to the point of having to beg to survive. So picture with me what is going on here. You have people who have lost their homes, their jobs, their families and perhaps most if not all forms of income. They literally have nothing, especially compared to us. Yet despite their circumstances, they were still able to give generously and to do it with joy. And so guess what? If they could experience joyful generosity, so can we.

Now, in just a moment we are going to talk more about what this joyful generosity looks like, but before we do I think we need to talk about how it is possible. How is it possible to be joyfully generous even if you are persecuted and poor? I think we have to admit that this just doesn't make sense to us, because honestly we normally equate joy with our physical and financial condition. We normally think joy comes from being safe, sound, and financially prosperous. We had a great example of this at the Super Bowl Halftime show, which apparently most people thought was the best

part of the event. Anyways, do you know the title of Bruno Mars' first song? *Billionaire*. You probably couldn't understand the lyrics, but here they are:

*I wanna be a billionaire so freakin' bad  
Buy all of the things I never had  
I wanna be on the cover of Forbes magazine  
Smiling next to Oprah and the Queen*

*Oh, every time I close my eyes  
I see my name in shining lights  
Yeah, a different city every night  
Oh, I swear the world better prepare  
For when I'm a billionaire<sup>1</sup>*

That pretty much sums it up. We think that money and security will give us joy. However, the Macedonians show us that joy doesn't come from comfort, but rather from the gospel. It comes from what we talked about last week, that regardless of how much money we have in our bank accounts, if we have the righteousness of Jesus Christ we are the wealthiest people in the world. As children of God we have the one thing that is worth more than all the money in the world – Jesus. That is what gave the Macedonians joy and allowed them to be generous; they knew that although they looked poor on the outside the truth was that they had incredible wealth, wealth that could never be taken away from them.

Here is the application for us: true comfort, stability, safety, and wealth doesn't come from external things but rather from an internal relationship with Jesus Christ. It comes from recognizing that although we were once poor, He has made us rich, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing that can take our riches away. So listen – if your joy and stability is dependent upon money and material possessions, then your joy will ebb and flow like the waves on the ocean. It will come and go, and to be honest with you in the world we live in today it will mostly go. However, if your joy comes from

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.metrolyrics.com/billionaire-lyrics-bruno-mars.html>

knowing Jesus and having the wealth that only He can provide, your joy will never go away, no matter what circumstances you face in life.

## **2. Generosity is sacrificial. (v. 3)**

Number two, generosity is sacrificial. Look at verse 3:

*For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord.*

Now, what exactly does it mean that the Macedonians gave beyond their means? Well, it means that they made changes to their lifestyle. It means they stopped doing some things that they were doing so that they could meet the needs of others. It means that they made sacrifices and took on financial burdens so that they could relieve the burdens of others.

Now, think about what this likely meant for the Macedonians, people who were already very, very poor. It probably meant that they went hungry from time to time. It probably meant that they went without the new clothes or shoes that they needed. It probably meant they didn't make the repairs to their home that they desperately needed to make. Whatever it specifically meant for them, it certainly meant that they went without things that they normally would have had. And for them, these things would have been needs not wants.

Now, I'm going to try and make the application here pretty simple for you. If we are going to be generous we are going to have to make sacrifices. For most of us this will actually be sacrifices of wants not needs. But regardless, if we want to be generous we are going to have to give some things up. Generosity requires that we make changes to our lifestyle so that we can help to carry the burdens of others.

Jonathon Edwards once wrote a tract on giving. In it he said, "The gospel obliges us to give when we are in distress to those in greater distress than

us. How else will we bear one another's burdens?"<sup>2</sup> I believe he took this from Galatians 6:2 where Paul says:

*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2, ESV)*

You do realize don't you, that this is what Jesus did for us? He came and bore our burdens so that we could be saved. In response we are called to bear one another's burdens.

Here is a very simple challenge for us today. If we want to be generous, as we have seen the gospel compels us to be, then we need to look at our lifestyles and make hard choices as to what we are going to cut in order to help carry the burdens of those in need. And I think if we are honest, most, if not all of us have plenty of room in our budgets where we can do this. So, I want to challenge you all to go home today, to look at your finances and decide what things are going to go so that you can generously give to those in need.

### **3. Generosity is a privilege.**

Number three, generosity is a privilege. This one is huge. Look at verse 4:

*Begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief in the saints.*

Let me ask you a couple of questions. Be honest with yourself. Do you view giving as something you should do or as something you get to do? When we take an offering here at Harmony, do you give out of guilt or out of excitement? When the offering plate comes by does your spouse have to pry the check out of your hand or do you fight over who gets to put it in? Are you a cheerful or a reluctant giver? I believe your answer to these questions makes all the difference in the world when it comes to generosity.

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<sup>2</sup> Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

The Macedonian Christians gave generously because they viewed giving as a privilege, something that they got to do. They considered it a favor that Paul was giving them the opportunity to be involved in meeting the needs of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. What's interesting here is that the Greek word for *favor* in verse 4 is the same word for grace that is used four other times in this passage. Do you get what this means? It means that when God gives us the ability and opportunity to give it is actually a means of His grace to us.

This is why the Macedonians were so excited to give. They saw giving as an opportunity for gain. We have a tendency to think of giving as a loss, but the Macedonians saw it as a big gain, so much so that they begged Paul to let them give.

Now, I think it might be helpful to be a little more specific here. In what way or ways do we gain in giving? To put it in the terms of the passage here, in what form does God's grace take shape in our lives when we give? Well, it goes back to what we talked about last week. When we give we experience God's grace in that we are laying up treasure for ourselves in heaven. Just think about how gracious God has been to us here today. He has blessed us with many material blessings, which means we have much with which to invest for our eternal futures. That is God's blessing, God's grace in our lives. That's why Jesus said that it is better to give than to receive.

In conjunction with that, God also shows grace in allowing us to be involved in spreading His glorious gospel. I mean, what is better than having the privilege to make known the thing that God is doing here on this earth, the one thing that truly matters. Listen; there is absolutely no better place that we can use our money than the furtherance of the gospel. It is God's grace that He gives us the privilege to do so. I really do believe the church needs to stop talking about giving as an obligation but rather as an opportunity, as a privilege, because that's what it is, and in fact it is one of the greatest privileges we can have on this earth. Think of this in terms of Multiply: Burlington. We don't know exactly what God is going to do there, but we expect big things. We expect that God is going to pour out His Spirit



in such a way that many people come to Christ and the city is turned upside down. Do you believe that? How exciting that is going to be. Well, it is God's grace to allow us to be involved in whatever He is planning to do in Burlington. And one of the ways He is going to do so is through gracing His people to generously provide the resources for it to happen.

Finally, God has shown us grace in allowing us to use our resources for His glory. Why is this significant? It's significant in that it gives meaning and purpose for our resources. Do you realize that if our resources aren't used for God's glory than they are ultimately wasted? Think of it this way. Warren Buffet is one of the richest men in the world. He's worth over \$50 billion. And while Buffet does some good things with his money, as far as I know he isn't a believer which means he cannot ultimately use all of that money for God's glory, meaning that it is all going to go to waste. However, because God has redeemed us and made us His, we now have the opportunity and privilege to use every last single one of our resources in a way that makes it eternally significant. That, my friends, is God's grace big time to every single one of us.

#### **4. Generosity is ultimately a matter of the heart.**

Finally, number four, generosity is ultimately a matter of the heart. Look at verse 5:

*And this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.*

Perhaps the most important thing for us to learn from the Macedonians is that generosity ultimately comes from a heart that is fully given to God. Note carefully what Paul is saying in verse 5. The Macedonians gave to others because they had already given themselves to God and knew that it was His will for them give to others. They gave themselves first to God and as a result they just naturally gave generously to meet the needs of others.

Do you get what this means? It means that before we can address our bank accounts, we must first make sure that we have addressed our hearts. We must first and foremost make sure that we haven't given Jesus just a part of our lives but all of our lives. You see, when Jesus has all of our life then generously giving part of ourselves to others is no big deal. When we have given ourselves fully to Him and He gives us the opportunity to give to others we respond as the Macedonians did, eagerly seeking to do for others what God has done for us.

Let me share an example that will hopefully drive this home. Do you remember the story of a guy by the name of Zacchaeus? The opening verses of Luke 19 tell us his story:

*[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. **2** And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. **3** And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. **4** So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. **5** And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." **6** So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. **7** And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." **8** And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." **9** And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10, ESV)*

Lot's of things that we could talk about here but the main point is that Jesus gave Himself for Zacchaeus, and in response Zacchaeus gave himself to Jesus, with the result that Zacchaeus generously gave to meet the needs of others. Zacchaeus didn't give in order to be saved, he gave because he was saved. Jesus gave His life for Zacchaeus, and in response Zacchaeus gave his life to Jesus and the result was generosity.

So again, this really comes back to what we talked about last week. Those who have truly experienced the generosity of Jesus will be generous people. When we truly understand that we have been bought with a price, and that price is the very blood of Jesus, than we will fully give our lives to Him and as a result will become generous people.

Let me leave you with this today. It's a rather long quote from a pastor by the name Robert Murray M'Cheyne, who ministered in Scotland in the mid-1800's. He explained the truths of 2 Corinthians 8 in this way:

*"Do you know the grace of Christ? Oh my dear friends, if you would be like Christ, and you pray that you will be, become like him in giving. 'Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor.' Objection: 'My money is my own.' Answer: Christ might have said, 'My blood is my own; my life is my own,' and then where would you be? Objection: 'But many people in need are undeserving.' Answer: Christ might have looked at you and said, 'Look at these wicked rebels, should I lay down my life for these? No, I will give to the good angels and the deserving poor.' But no, he left the ninety-nine sheep, and came after the lost. He gave his blood to the undeserving. Objection: 'But people who I give my money to might abuse it.' Answer: Christ might have said the same thing, with far greater truth. Christ knew thousands would trample his blood under their feet, that most would despise it, that many would make his blood an excuse for sinning more; yet he gave his own blood. My dear Christians if you want to be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely even to the vile and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy, and so shall you be. It's not your money I want; it's your happiness. Remember his own word, 'It's more blessed to give than to receive.'"<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Keller, T. J. (2013). *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive*. New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church.