

**2 Corinthians 8:1-15**  
**(2 Samuel 24:18-25; Mark 12:41-44)**  
**“The Grace of Giving: Generosity out of Poverty”**

**Introduction**

In this letter, Paul has challenged the Corinthians to reject any teaching that promises wealth, success and prosperity, to those who follow Jesus, and to remember that God has put the treasure of the Gospel in jars of clay, folk like us who may be called to face the same kinds of trouble that the Lord and his apostles faced in order to redeem the world.

Paul now turns to a specific problem that resulted from prosperity teaching. In his first Corinthian letter, Paul gave specific instructions for the collection of a gift that the Gentile churches planned to make to alleviate the poverty of the mother church in Jerusalem. In his instructions, he encouraged them to establish a disciplined pattern of weekly giving for the advance of the Gospel and the care of the poor (see 1 Corinthians 16). The Corinthian Christians began taking this collection of weekly offerings and saving them. But once the false apostles arrived and began teaching a self-centered message of personal prosperity, the Corinthians stopped taking the collection and began focusing on themselves.

Now that they have begun to show signs of repentance and seem to be returning to the truth of the Gospel of Christ, Paul turns to address once again the matter of the collection, and in doing so he gives us some of the most important teaching on stewardship to be found in all of Scripture.

It is an important, but often overlooked, emphasis of Jesus’ teaching that he spoke more often about our use of money than he did about any other aspect of our lives. The reason should be obvious: as he said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” There is, perhaps, no more accurate indicator of what really matters to us, of what we really love, than our discretionary use of money. We have many fixed expenditures, and even the wealthiest people can so overextend themselves as to be cash poor. But even in the worst economic times, we Americans are still among the wealthiest people in human history. What an incredible opportunity God has given us to advance his kingdom!

So many of you are faithful year after year, in good times and bad. But imagine what we could do for our community and for the advance of God’s mission to the world if everyone in this congregation gave generously to the work of Christ. This is Paul’s vision for the Corinthian Christians. He wants them each and all to know a joyful generosity, not only for the sake of the work, but for their own sake, for the grace and joy that will flow back to them as they express the new life that is theirs in Christ Jesus through a life of generosity toward God and toward one another. You and I need to hear this as a fresh word from Christ to us, his people.

## Body

### 1. Joyful generosity is an evidence of God's grace at work in an individual life and a congregation's life, and it displays that grace for all to see (8:1-9).

Paul first makes his point with an illustration that should sober, even shame, his readers: namely, the case of the impoverished persecuted Macedonian Christians, who both sought and received this grace of giving (8:1-5). They suffered so much and had so little of what this world counts important, but nonetheless, were eager to give to those even poorer than themselves as an expression of the unity within the church of Jew and Gentile, and as an expression of gratitude to the Jerusalem church for taking the Gospel to the world.

And Paul speaks of these poor Christians as giving themselves in a way that surprised him: they gave themselves first to the Lord, and only then did they give themselves to others. In other words, their compassion, their joy and their generosity came from a deep work of grace that led them to a consecration of self to the Lord. Once you realize that you are the Lord's, then it follows that all you are and all you have is his, and that you are just a steward of what you once considered your own.

Paul applies this to his readers by urging them to put their money where their mouths have been. They are proud of their spiritual gifts, of the graces at which they excel. So, Paul writes, excel in this grace of giving. The clear implication is that, if you don't do this, all your boasting of your faith and knowledge is in vain.

Paul follows with an illustration that should convict and inspire his readers: namely, "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" (8:9). This is, of course, the supreme act of grace and generosity. It is one thing to give out of one's wealth, another to give out of one's poverty. But for the Lord of life to lay aside his glory and become poor and powerless in what this world values in order to redeem those who have despised and rejected him is the greatest example of all.

It is by his joyful generosity that we have been redeemed from death and judgment and made his fellow heirs, sharing his life, his destiny, and his glorious inheritance. How can we then be close-fisted toward anyone or anything? And if we lack a heart of joyful gratitude expressed in joyful

generosity, can we really yet know this Christ who redeemed us at such great cost?

## **2. Joyful generosity benefits, not only the recipient, but the giver as well (8:10-15).**

Paul then makes a second point: namely, that joyful generosity benefits not only those who receive whatever gifts are given, but also benefits the giver. He reminds them that the Lord does not ask us for what we do not have, but he does expect what we have, because it is an evidence of grace at work in our lives, and an expression of our unity with other believers.

We must be careful here, because this can be misunderstood as a version of prosperity teaching, that if I just give enough I will get back here and now greater physical wealth. That is not always the case. What we receive back is far greater than physical wealth. It is the joy of being part of the only mission that will transcend human history and receive a well done from the Lord of life. It is an eternal investment that, as Jesus said, neither moth nor rust can consume, not can thieves break in and steal it.

I think of this from time to time when people tell me that they are interested in local work, work that effects their families and their friends, but are not much interested in the work of missions far from home. Those aren't my people, they say. They are the responsibility of others, of those who belong to their culture or nation. But Paul's words here challenge that idea. He is calling on the church around the world to care for one another, and reminding his readers that those who care for others when others are in need are, as it were, making a deposit toward the future when they themselves may need the encouragement and assistance of other believers. And, above all, it is pleasing to the Lord.

## **Conclusion**

What of you? Have you known this grace in your life, the grateful recognition of what Christ did to redeem you? Have you yet given yourself first of all to the Lord, so that you realize that all you have and are is his? And then, do you realize that all that you and I have is his, to be used in celebrating our knowledge of him, in extending his grace to the ends of the earth and in expressing his compassion to those in need?

The longing for this, and its disciplined expression, are marks of one who understands the Gospel, who has been gripped by grace and who is given to the mission entrusted to us by the one who, "though he was rich, yet for [our] sake became poor, so that [we] by his poverty might become rich" (8:9).