

STEWARDSHIP: WHO OWNS YOUR STUFF?

4

THE GRACE TO GIVE

2 Corinthians 8:1–15

By Elizabeth B. Crawford

“As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ‘I tell you the truth,’ he said, ‘this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’”

Luke 21:1–4

“To give away money is to win a victory over the dark powers that oppress us.”

Gordon Cosby

“Giving is the alternative to spending or hoarding that breaks the back of materialism. The act of giving is a vivid reminder that it’s all about God, not about us. Giving is a joyful surrender to a greater person and a greater agenda. It affirms Christ’s lordship. Giving dethrones me and exalts him. It breaks the chains of mammon that would enslave me. It makes heaven, not earth, my center of gravity.”

Randy Alcorn

AIM OF STUDY

- To understand that God supplies everything we need, including the grace to give generously of what He's already given to us.

KEY VERSE

“But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”
2 Corinthians 8: 7

PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**how to teach the Bible in small group**” and “**some practical suggestions for leading a small group discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are providing this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to help resource you for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* as excellent resources for study.

OPENERS

What does generosity look like? What makes some people more willing to share or give away their wealth while others cling to it or spend it compulsively?

A few years ago, some three and four year olds at our church collected money to buy blankets for our local ministry to the homeless. The teachers placed a wrapped Christmas box on the desk in their classroom where the kids and parents check in each week. Throughout the month of November, the children brought in their change and placed it in the box. One week, a four-year-old boy named Avery brought in his entire piggy bank. His parents told the teachers that he had decided completely on

his own to donate all the change, allowance, and birthday money he had been saving. Naturally they were very emotional since the contents added up to \$75.00! Together as a class, the thirty or so children gave \$175.00. At a local thrift store, the teachers were able to purchase five sleeping bags and four garbage bags full of various blankets. That Christmas, many lives were warmed by the generosity of these young children.

The following spring, the children studied the story of Zacchaeus and learned how he gave money back after meeting Jesus. The teachers sent home kindness jars with the children, and each time a child did something kind, his or her parent praised the child and made a monetary donation to the jar. The lesson aimed at teaching the kids that they were able to be kind because of God's mercy. They were rewarded for their kindness, but they were then asked give their reward back to God who deserved the credit for what they had done. At the end of that month, the kids brought in their kindness jars. With the money collected, the teachers purchased enough groceries to fill five large shopping bags for our "Bag Hunger" campaign.

What enabled these children to give their reward back to God? Why were they willing to give to total strangers? How could they be so sacrificial in their donations? What impact did their actions have on their parents, teachers and those in need?

What do you usually think is the secret to a person's generosity?

Pray that you and the group would be open to what the Holy Spirit wants to reveal about God's gracious provision and the privilege of giving.

INTRODUCTION TO THIS STUDY

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians before visiting the church in Corinth for the third time. He spent most of the letter defending himself and his ministry since false teachers had insinuated that he was an illegitimate apostle. In chapters eight and nine, he specifically dealt with collecting money for the impoverished mother church in Jerusalem. The Corinthians had begun to make donations prior to this letter, but had stopped possibly because the false teachers had sown mistrust of Paul's integrity. Paul urged them kindly to complete the work of collecting the money before he would arrive so that he and other trustworthy men could take it to Jerusalem (Hughes, *Second Letter*, pp. xvi-xvii, 283-286). In fact, he sent the 2 Corinthians letter with Titus who had begun collecting the money a year before (Hughes, "2 Cor.", *NIV*, p.1771).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

1. Let's read the passage aloud. Would someone read verses 1-7, 8-12, and 13-15? What does Paul want the Corinthians to know (v. 1)? Who were the Macedonian churches?

Paul changes topics [from defending himself] in verse 8:1 and speaks to the Corinthian believers about God's grace on their neighbors in the province of Macedonia. These would be churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea which Paul established on his second missionary journey in Acts 16:6–17:15. The church in Corinth belonged to the province of Achaia. Today, all the churches Paul talks about, with the exception of Jerusalem's, would be in Greece.

2. What was life like for the Macedonian Christians (v. 2)? What attitude did they have in spite of their hardship?

Paul mentions that they experienced severe trial and extreme poverty. But he says they were overflowing with joy and were able to show rich generosity. These seem the exact opposites of what we would expect most humans to show in hard times. Only God's grace could explain how they could be joyous in trials and generous in extreme poverty.

***When have you felt joy in giving to another believer?**

3. How did they go beyond what Paul expected (vv. 3-5)?

Paul says the Macedonian Christians gave not just as much as they were able, but they gave beyond their ability. He says that the Macedonians urgently pleaded with Paul and his companions for what they considered a privilege—sharing in the service or giving to meet the needs of the Jerusalem Christians. If the false teachers had accused Paul of begging for material gifts with the intention of promoting his own interests [really supporting himself from the money (Hughes, *Second Letter*, p. 286), or being able to boast about how much he collected], these words put an end to that idea. It was the Macedonians, not Paul, who did the begging (Chrysostom, cited in Hughes, *Second Letter*, p. 291). We need to stop and ask ourselves, what do we usually beg others for? How contrary to our culture to think of depleting our surplus as a privilege or something we take joy in!

Paul also was surprised that these believers had seen that giving their lives to the Lord came before everything else, and since they now saw their lives as His, the generous giving came naturally. Hughes points out that the Macedonians also gave themselves "to us" indicating their view of Paul and his associates as the Lord's servants deserving respect and obedience (*Second Letter*, p.292). Why did this surprise Paul? Perhaps he did not expect such an integrated or mature understanding from churches that he had been forced to leave so soon after their founding when persecution broke out. They probably didn't have many mature Christian role models to imitate, so the unselfishness of Paul and his mission team or the self-sacrificing life of Christ were what they might have imitated.

4. What did Paul expect of the Corinthians (vv. 6-7)?

Paul is sending Titus again who had helped the Corinthians a year before begin collecting funds for the Jerusalem church (v. 10). He expects Titus, with the Corinthians cooperation, to complete the task of gathering the offering. He urges them by praising some of the gifts or workings of the Spirit they were so proud of manifesting—faith, speech, and knowledge (see 1 Cor. 12-14). He commends them for their earnestness in 2 Cor. 7:11 (*Second Letter*, p.296) since they had repented and dealt decisively with sin in their midst. He also cites their love, although the translation seems to indicate that what they abounded in was the degree of Paul’s love for them (*Second Letter*, pp. 296-297) in spite of their failings pointed out in both Corinthian letters. Perhaps Paul is speaking tongue in cheek using their lofty opinion of themselves to confront them with their weakness in this area: giving to their impoverished brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

5. How would you explain “the grace of giving” in your own words?

Paul mentions grace several times in this chapter (vv. 1, 6, 7, 9). Grace, *charis*, is usually understood as “...the fact that salvation is freely given by God to undeserving sinners” (Smedes, p. 547). Grace emphasizes God’s free will to give to us what He wishes without our earning or deserving it (Smedes, pp. 549-550). However, Paul uses “grace” in conjunction with other aspects of what God has given us such as faith, his apostleship, and power. It can also refer to the believer’s thanksgiving in response to the underserved acts of God (Smedes, pp. 550-551). There are references to the various gifts of the Holy Spirit as “grace given us” (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 7:7; 1 Cor. 12). Smedes calls these “grace-gifts”, *charismata*, since they come by the power of the Holy Spirit freely given by God to His church (p. 550). Perhaps Paul is referring to the ability to give generously, even beyond what one possesses at the present, as “the grace of giving.” It is the willingness to give that God makes possible as His Spirit lives out the self-giving life of Jesus in us.

6. What does Paul use to motivate the Corinthians (vv. 8-9)?

Paul has talked about the miraculous generosity of the Macedonians hoping to revive the Corinthians’ zeal to contribute to the Jerusalem church. He does not command the church to contribute, since that would undermine his main points in both Chapter 8 and 9 about God’s grace Jesus’ sacrifice, our willingness, and cheerful giving. Hughes points out, however, that only someone with the authority to command the church to act in a certain way could mention that he wasn’t commanding the Corinthians (Hughes, *Second Letter*, pp. 297-298)! Since his comment about testing or proving their love by putting it alongside the Macedonian’s could be twisted into self-centered competition between two groups of fellow Christians (v. 8), Paul goes further. He reminds them of the source of all giving and the supreme example of sacrificial love: Jesus Christ. When we think of Jesus freely giving up all His privileges in heaven and

becoming “poor,” we should remember He lived among us with human limitations, subject to ridicule and rejection, and without material or financial security. Ultimately, Jesus lived in such perfect obedience to the Father that He even gave up His life to be the perfect sacrifice required to pay the death penalty that we owed for our sin. Paul describes Christians, who benefited from Jesus’ substitutionary death and resurrection, as now “rich.” Since God did not withhold His greatest gift of all, His Son, why would we withhold anything? We have the assurance He will give us all things along with His Son (Rom. 8:32).

7. How has Jesus Christ made you rich?

Everyone who has trusted in Jesus for eternal salvation has received the following and so much more: forgiveness of sins; the declaration of being not guilty before God; the cleansing from our sin; the eternal life of Jesus; adoption as God’s sons and daughters; relationships in the family of God; friendship with Jesus; power and authority to do kingdom works through the Holy Spirit; gifts and callings to further the growth and maturing of the church, the people of God; love, joy, peace and other fruit of the Holy Spirit; guidance, wisdom and truth; great and precious promises of God so we can live in a way that pleases Him; provision of our needs; protection from the devil; an inheritance that can’t be taken away from us; and the moment by moment presence of God whose loves us and died for us. Since God freely gives all these if we will receive them by faith in Jesus Christ, we are wealthier beyond any category the world might designate as rich.

8. What did Paul advise (vv. 10-11)?

Paul reminds them that they were the first Greek Christians to begin collecting money for the Jerusalem believers. He advises that they complete this effort so that their reputed eagerness would be demonstrated. He points out that their giving should be “according to their means.” What Paul is saying is that we are to give as much as we can from what we have, and that we do not need to fear that God is asking for what we haven’t been given.

9. What makes our giving acceptable to God (v. 12)?

Paul makes it clear that our willingness to give is what God is looking for, and the actual amount is not as important. Perhaps he was thinking of Jesus’ comment in the temple as He watched the widow give two small copper coins while the rich put much larger amounts in the treasury. Jesus pointed out that the widow had given more, since the wealthy had an abundance to contribute from but she gave all she had (Luke 21:1-4).

***What’s usually uppermost in your mind as you give?**

10. How does Paul explain that no one is being asked to do more than his or her fair share (vv. 13-15)?

Twice Paul mentions the idea of “equality”. He believes that God is gracious enough to give a surplus to one part of the church so that they can experience the joy of meeting another part of the Body’s needs. Then, at another time, Paul envisions that the Corinthians’ short supply will be met by another group of believers.

11. What in Israel’s past does Paul refer to? What spiritual lesson was in the giving of manna?

Paul quotes from Ex. 16:18 in which Moses is explaining the miraculous gift of manna for the Israelites as they lived in the wilderness. Each person was to gather an omer, or about two quarts, in the morning and eat that through the day. No one was to keep extra overnight since God would provide a fresh supply every day (Ex. 16:19). It was certainly a lesson in trusting God for daily bread (see also Matt. 6:11). If they disobeyed God and hoarded extra manna, it would be full of maggots and stink (Ex. 16:20). Only on the eve of the Sabbath were they allowed to gather an extra supply so that they could rest even from gathering food on the Lord’s holy day (Ex. 16:22-26). This practice continued for forty years (Ex.16: 35), a great lesson in trusting God and seeing Him faithfully provide daily for food.

APPLYING THE TEXT

***What is your usual response when someone in the church presents a financial need?**

***What makes you hesitant to give until you deplete your resources?**

***How do you know when “enough is enough”—whether saving, spending or giving?**

WRAPPING IT UP

This study highlighted a secret of generous giving: that God is the One who touches our hearts with His grace so that we have the desire or willingness to help others in need. He also graciously supplies what we need so that we can help our brothers and sisters in Christ when they are undergoing difficult times. In our next study, we’ll see what else Paul considered the blessings that resulted from God’s grace enabling us to give willingly and extravagantly.

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