

**The Point:** God's generous grace moves us to be generous.

**Session Passage:** 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

## 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

**Connection to the Point.** Despite their hardships, the Macedonian churches were generous.

**2 Corinthians.** Corinth was one of the most prominent cities in the world in Paul's day. Located in the Roman province of Achaia (the southern part of modern-day Greece) along some major land and sea trade routes, it was a metropolitan city that drew people of various backgrounds and religions from all over the world. Paul founded the church at Corinth about AD 50–52 during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-11).

Second Corinthians is one of Paul's four letters to the church at Corinth, only two of which remain. Paul wrote First Corinthians (the second letter) due to issues the church was having with such things as disunity (1 Cor. 3:5-17), immorality (5:1-13), food offered to idols (8:1-13), communion practices (11:17-34) and spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14). Second Corinthians (the fourth letter) was written in part to address individuals in the church who were hostile toward Paul and questioning his apostolic authority. Chapters 8–9 address the issue of a collection being made for the believers in Judea. Paul urged the Corinthians to participate in the effort.

**Grace of God** (v. 1). The Greek term for *grace* is a key theme of chapters 8–9, appearing ten times in those two chapters. *Grace* is the demonstration of unmerited favor toward someone—in this instance God's unmerited favor toward people. In this context, Paul was referring to how God's grace had motivated the Macedonian churches to extend charity to others even during their own difficult times.

**The churches of Macedonia** (v. 1). In the first century AD, modern Greece was divided into two regions. The northern region was Macedonia while the coastal southern region was Achaia. Acts mentions churches in Macedonia at Philippi (Acts 16:12-40), Thessalonica (17:1-9), and Berea (vv. 10-14). In the region of Achaia, Paul visited Athens (vv. 16-34) and established the church at Corinth (18:1-18).

**Severe trial brought about by affliction** (v. 2). The New Testament describes some of the trials experienced by believers in Philippi (Acts 16:20-24) and Thessalonica (17:5-9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4). *Affliction* (persecution, oppression, tribulation) led to severe *trial*, which translates a Greek term literally meaning "testing." The word's focus is on the positive response to such *affliction*. Such persecution could have included social and financial trials, as well as physical persecution and imprisonment for their faith. Paul viewed such things as tests of the Macedonian believers' Christian character which had revealed the strength of their faith.

**Abundant joy . . . extreme poverty** (v. 2). Probably as a result of persecution, the Macedonian believers experienced *extreme poverty*. The term for *extreme* means "down to the deepest place." The Macedonians experienced "rock bottom" poverty. But even in their poverty they experienced *abundant joy*. Christians can experience joy even in the most difficult circumstances because our joy is not focused on our external circumstances; our joy is in our relationship with Jesus—in being forgiven of our sins and

brought into God's family, and focuses on the new, eternal life we experience in part now and in full in the age to come (Matt. 5:10-12; Acts 5:41; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). God works even through our trials to spread the gospel (Phil. 1:12-20) and bring us to maturity in Christ (Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

**Wealth of generosity** (v. 2). The Greek term translated *generosity* refers to one who has personal integrity which is demonstrated in his or her words and actions. For the Macedonian believers, it involved sincere concern, and it led to their generous giving to the Judean Christians in need (1 Cor. 16:1-4). The Macedonians, who were not wealthy in material possessions, were wealthy in their generosity, and they displayed that through their sacrificial giving.

## 2 Corinthians 8:3-6

**Connection to the Point.** The Macedonian churches' generosity grew out of their commitment to the Lord.

**According to their ability . . . beyond their ability** (v. 3). The Macedonian believers had given all that could have been expected of them. And then by God's grace (v. 1) they had given some more! This giving came not out of their surplus but out of their limited resources (see Mark 12:41-44). Their giving was **of their own accord**. The Greek term for this phrase means voluntarily or without coercion. The word describes Titus's voluntary involvement in gathering the collection for the Judean believers—"by his own choice" (2 Cor. 8:16-17).

**Privilege of sharing** (v. 4). The Macedonian believers **begged** to have the privilege of giving to the collection for the Judean Christians. The Greek term for *privilege* is the same word translated "grace" (v. 1). As in the case of the Macedonian believers, giving is both through the grace of God and an opportunity and blessing. The Greek term for *sharing* refers to an association in regard to mutual interests and sharing with one another. In this context it refers to partnership and fellowship in the gospel **ministry**.

**Not just as we hoped** (v. 5). The Macedonian believers had given beyond what could have been expected in light of their difficult financial situation (v. 3). These words could imply that Paul and his coworkers were shocked by how much these believers contributed to the Judean relief fund.

**They gave themselves** (v. 5). Through their actions, the Macedonian believers gave themselves **first to the Lord**. In this context, the Greek term for *first* refers to both first in sequence and first in priority. Paul's words recognize the matter of giving to any ministry or cause is a heart matter between the believer and the Lord. Our relationship with the Lord is to always be our first priority; all our motivations and actions should flow out of our relationship with Christ and His lordship over us. Because the Macedonians were fully committed to the Lord, they also committed themselves to the work of His apostle Paul, specifically in the collection of financial resources for famine relief for the Judean believers. Today, giving financial resources can sometimes be easier than giving ourselves and our time to the work of ministry. In our society, which is one of the wealthiest in the world, our time and presence are sometimes greater gifts than money. But all are needed.

**By God's will** (v. 5). Paul also recognized that the Macedonians' involvement in the collection for the Judean Christians was due to *God's will*. The acts of the Macedonian believers were both their own and at the same time ultimately God working out His will through them (Phil. 2:12-13). Paul attributed his apostleship to the will of God (2 Cor. 1:1). The Corinthians' giving was part of God's will as well.

**Titus** (v. 6). Later in this chapter, Paul identified Titus as “my partner and coworker” (v. 23). Paul had apparently given Titus some responsibility in the collection of the funds (vv. 16-17). Evidently, unlike the Macedonian believers, the Corinthian Christians had failed to **complete** the process of collecting funds for the Judean believers. The Greek term for *complete* means to bring something to a successful conclusion or to successfully finish something that was begun. The Corinthians apparently had lost their initial zeal for the project. Paul had sent Titus back to the church to help complete the process of gathering the funds. The Corinthians needed to follow through on their commitment to give, and Titus would facilitate the completion of the project.

**Act of grace** (v. 6). Giving is not just a duty or obligation. It is an *act of grace*. Just as God’s grace had been the motivation behind the Macedonian believers’ giving (v. 1), so too the Corinthians’ giving was to be motivated by God’s grace. Giving should be a response to the gracious activity of God in our lives, first and foremost in His accomplishing our salvation through Jesus Christ. Such giving is also an act of grace extended toward others.

## 2 Corinthians 8:7-9

**Connection to the Point.** The Corinthians were called to excel in grace, even as Christ has been generous in His grace to us.

**Excel in everything** (v. 7). Paul noted that the Corinthian believers excelled in five areas, and he would suggest a sixth—giving. First, the Corinthian Christians excelled in **faith**. The Corinthians had apparently grown in their faith (their trust in God), so much so that Paul mentioned this at the beginning of the letter (1:24). The apostle had also mentioned the spiritual gift of faith (which believes and expects God to move in power) in his previous letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:9), along with other miraculous gifts such as healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, and tongues (vv. 9-10). Such gifts were present in the Corinthian church to the degree that in 1 Corinthians Paul had to deal with issues related to how the congregation had elevated particular gifts over others (chap. 12). He may have been using a bit of sarcasm in saying these believers expected the miraculous but left the mundane (such as giving) to others like the impoverished Macedonian believers.

The Corinthian church excelled in **speech**. Several of the gifts Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 12 related to speech—messages of wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:7-10). In 1 Corinthians Paul raised the subject of gifts to deal with a problem in the church, so quite possibly in this instance he was prodding them to give by encouraging them to have the same zeal for giving as they had for these other spiritual gifts.<sup>1</sup>

The Corinthians emphasized **knowledge**, so much so that Paul used the Greek term for *knowledge* sixteen times in 1 and 2 Corinthians. *Knowledge* involves spiritual insight received from the Lord as a gift. It is included in the list of spiritual gifts the apostle addressed with the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:8). Paul certainly was not disparaging such spiritual gifts. Rather, again he encouraged them to have the same zeal for giving.

Paul also commended the Corinthians for their **diligence** or zeal. The Greek term refers to a person who has an eagerness to do something and is highly motivated to get it done. Paul may have been referring to how the Corinthian believers had previously received a letter (no longer in existence) delivered by the apostle’s coworker and emissary Titus and their response of repentance concerning the issues the apostle addressed in that letter (2 Cor. 7:1-16, esp. v. 11). They faithfully dedicated themselves to the

apostle in these earlier matters, but what Paul needed was for them to approach their giving to the relief collection in a similar manner.

Paul also commended the church in Corinth for their **love** for him. They excelled in loving him, even though some in the church challenged his apostolic authority (2 Cor. 10–12). Though Paul did not question their love for him, he had a measure of disappointment that they did not keep pace with the poorer churches in Macedonia in their giving. They loved the apostle, and he desired that they express that love through their giving. It has been suggested that the construction in the Greek in this verse was normally used to address a superior and that in this context Paul was expressing his desire rather than giving a command.<sup>2</sup>

**Command** (v. 8). What was implicit in the previous verse is now made explicit. Considering his encouragement for the Corinthians to resume their giving to the Judean relief collection, Paul made sure that they did not think that this was a command that came only from his apostolic authority. It was not an order from a general to a soldier or a master to a slave. That is not to say that commanding Christians to give is wrong. But that is not the spirit in which Paul encouraged faithful giving. He desired that all giving come from the heart of a willing servant (2 Cor. 9:5) and as an act of grace (vv. 7-8).

**Testing the genuineness of your love** (v. 8). Paul had no doubt about the sincerity of love displayed by the Macedonian churches, because their generous giving in times of trial proved their love and commitment to the Lord, Paul, and to the ministry in Judea. Paul hoped and desired to feel the same way about the Corinthian church. Thus, their gifts stood as a test of their sincere love. The **diligence of others** left questions in his mind about the diligence of the Corinthians that was lacking.

**He was rich** (v. 9). Paul appealed to the gracious nature of Jesus as the apostle asked the Corinthian believers to resume their giving. He declared Jesus was *rich*. But what did he mean by that? In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul declared that the eternal Son of God humbled Himself by becoming poor in the sense of becoming a human being through the incarnation. As a servant for our sakes He humbled Himself to the point of dying on the cross to atone for our sins (Phil. 2:6-8). The incarnation displayed the generous nature of Jesus.

Through Jesus's sacrifice, the Corinthian believers had become spiritually **rich** in Christ. They had been forgiven their sins, been reconciled to God, adopted as children of God, received eternal life, and much more! In response to the grace and gifts of God through Christ they had received, Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to adopt a similar attitude of generosity toward their needy brothers and sisters in Judea.

1. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, v. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 373.

2. Ibid., 374.