

# Rescued for Generosity

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading this morning is taken from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians in the eighth chapter, beginning at the first verse.

And you'll find it on page 1163 in the Church Bibles. 2 Corinthians 8, verse 1. And then when I get to verse 15, I'm going to move to 9, verse 10.

Paul writes, As much as they were able, and even beyond their ability, entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

And they exceeded our expectations. They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.

So we urge Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

[ 1 : 37 ] But since you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in the love we have kindled in you, see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

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, through his poverty, might become rich.

And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give, but also to have the desire to do so.

Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it according to your means.

[ 2 : 50 ] For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

Our desire is not that others might, sorry, others might be relieved while you are hard-pressed, but that there might be equality.

At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn, their plenty will supply what you need.

The goal is equality. As it is written, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.

And now at verse 9, verse 10 of chapter 9. Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness.

[ 4 : 03 ] You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion. And through us, your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people, but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

And in their prayers for you, their hearts will go out to you because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thanks Michael for reading.

[ 5 : 20 ] So if you could keep your Bibles open at 2 Corinthians chapter 8, that would be a great help to me. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet which we're almost following. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this opportunity to hear your word to us about generosity. We ask that by your spirit you will help us to know your love and grow in your grace and experience your spirit at work in our lives that we could respond rightly to you.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, right from the early church times, Christian living has been countercultural. In every culture that Christians find themselves, Jesus calls his people, doesn't he, to let your light shine so that others might see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. So we're called to be a city on a hill. And for the early church, as it exploded across the Roman Empire, amidst great cost to the early Christians, there were distinctive values that meant they stood out.

One was in sexual ethics, in a very promiscuous society, they had a sexual ethic of purity and faithfulness in marriage. In the value and dignity of all human life, was very distinctive in the Roman world.

[ 6 : 47 ] And one of the areas where Christians have been distinctive in different cultures and times is in how we handle money. People commented of the early Christians that they seemed to be quick to give their money, quick to change their lifestyle so that they were more generous, and at the same time, they seemed to be rich.

In other words, they seemed to have everything they needed. They had a joy, a contentment. So it's appropriate to ask, if we're Christians today, is my approach to money distinctive to the approach of my neighbours, of the people around me, my colleagues?

This chapter, 2 Corinthians 8, helps us understand in what ways that it should be distinctive. The specific situation for the teaching was a first century crisis.

There was a famine in the region around Jerusalem, and the Apostle Paul is writing to churches like this one in Corinth that he established with his gospel. And he's encouraging them to give money to support the churches that are in this famine.

And as he does that, it was this unique gospel moment, this unique moment to demonstrate and display to the world that the message of Jesus Christ draws people from every nation into one family.

[ 8 : 09 ] So Paul takes the opportunity of that crisis to give some valuable principles about the models for Christian giving and the motivation for Christian giving.

And the first thing we see is the unexpected grace in Christian giving. So just look with me again at verse 1. He says, And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

Now, I wonder, if we just pause there and we hadn't read on before, what we might expect Paul to write next. What is this grace that has been given to the Macedonian churches?

Maybe we'd expect him to say they received some money. Or maybe we'd expect him to say they received some healing ministry or a great work of the Spirit, some kind of revival like that.

But actually, in verse 3, he tells us what the grace is that's been received by them. Verse 3, I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability.

[ 9 : 19 ] Isn't that striking? So we think of giving as a blessing to those who receive it, and it is. But Paul first wants us to see it the other way around. This is God's grace at work in the Macedonian Christians that they would give as much as they were able and even beyond their ability financially.

Why don't we see it like that? Why don't we see giving our money as a grace gift to us? Why does a conversation about money kind of raise our hackles?

I guess it's because in our culture we have an unhealthy relationship with money. The air we breathe all around us says to us, if you want to make it through life you will need more money than you have or you'll need the money you have.

And we get so preoccupied with the financial concerns of this life, lots of them very good concerns. Concerns about paying our rent or paying a mortgage, heating our homes, our pension, holidays, education for some of us, healthcare.

So we are preoccupied by those needs. And in our culture money is power because money gives you the chance to take control of those things.

[ 10 : 35 ] It gives you choice in life. So naturally, knowing that money is power, we hold on to our money with a tight fist. We're afraid of not having money. And so we have money sickness.

And God's word is really valuable to us this morning. It's good for us. Especially if we feel reluctant to give. Because God is good. We can trust him.

And he loves us. And here is God speaking his word to us from outside of our culture where the air we breathe says, you need your money for yourself. And he liberates us with his truth about money. From money sickness to money wellness. It's not that money is bad. The Bible doesn't say money is bad. Money is a gift from God. The money we have, if we have money, is a gift from him. If we worked for it, our work ethic and everything we had to get the job we have was from God. Money is a gift from him. And it does give us power. And when we see it rightly as a gift from God to us, he can move us to use that power to serve others.

[ 11 : 45 ] And build them up in generous ways. We can use our money to bring glory to God and to love other people as we give to seek the growth of his kingdom. So this is why giving is a grace gift to the giver, to us if we're giving.

And Paul applies that in quite a punchy way here to the church in Corinth because if you remember from the autumn, we're looking at 1 Corinthians, this was a church that liked to think of itself as very gifted.

They were preoccupied with their own spiritual gifts. They wanted to be impressive in all kinds of ways. They had a sense of self-importance. And Paul says, well, how about excelling in this gift? Look at verse 7. But since you, the church in Corinth, excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and in the love we've kindled in you, see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

In other words, if you want to be known as a church for something you excel in, why not be ambitious to excel in the gift of generosity with your money?

[ 12 : 55 ] So giving is the grace of God at work in the Christian who gives. And that's really good news for you, for any of us, if we feel that we don't have much money to give.

It can be tempting to think, oh well, the need seems so big, and I don't have much money and so my giving isn't really going to make much difference. Whereas what we can see here is that it's still worth giving because of what the good it will do for you personally.

Giving is about God at work in your own heart, graciously. So we've thought about the unexpected grace in Christian giving. Next Paul gives us his astonishing model of Christian giving.

And it's these churches in Macedonia that we've heard about. So notice Paul's approach here. He doesn't give a command about a certain amount to give. Naturally, that's what we want, don't we? We want to know how much exactly do I need to give. Paul doesn't have a command like that. Over the page in chapter 9 verses 6 and 7 he says, each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give.

[ 14 : 04 ] Not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver. What Paul does instead of giving us an amount we have to give, a command, is he just holds up a model of extraordinary sacrificial giving for us.

Have a look with me at verses 2 and 4 where we hear about their situation and what it meant for their giving from verse 2. in the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. It's a picture of extraordinary sacrifice, isn't it?

So we might think something like, I'll hold back on giving this year because there's a cost of living crisis or because I'm saving up for something, a car, a flat, a wedding, retirement.

Paul holds up the church in Macedonia and says they were in extreme poverty and this is by the standards of the first century Middle East. In Scotland, even before we've spent any money on ourselves, we've got free healthcare, free dentistry, free prescriptions, publicly funded schools.

[ 15 : 28 ] It's not at all easy to imagine what it must have been like for Christians in Macedonia, for Paul, who knew what it was to be hungry and not have enough food to eat, to say they were in extreme poverty.

And he says that they had a severe trial in verse 2. I take that as a separate thing to their extreme poverty. There was a severe trial and they had overflowing joy like the joy we've been hearing about in recent weeks from Jesus' teaching in John 16.

The joy of knowing God's goodness, that he is a father who really loves us. The joy of knowing Jesus died for them. The joy of the Holy Spirit in their life, encouraging them, equipping them, helping them know Jesus, the joy of being part of a Christian family all around the world.

In verse 2, Paul says that that overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. So verse 3, I think that's extraordinary, verse 3, that they gave even beyond their ability. Did Paul twist their arm? Were they manipulated by his overbearing leadership style? No, he says, end of verse 3, entirely on their own. They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

[16:52] And they exceeded our expectations. They gave themselves first of all to the Lord and then by the will of God also to us.

So sometimes when one of the dangers with the idea of tithing, which is an Old Testament command to give a tenth of what you had, was that one of the dangers was that you might give that and then think, right, the rest is for me.

So a tenth of my life is for God and the rest is for me to enjoy. Whereas Christian giving is about giving yourself, the whole of yourself, to God in response to his goodness to us.

And then thinking about our money as just one aspect of that whole of life worship of God. That's our model. So people ask me about tithing and I found that more in Scotland.

I think it's been more of a tradition in Scottish church history to think of the idea of giving a tithe, giving a tenth. And people have asked me, last year I said I don't think the tithe applies anymore to Christians and people asked me about it.

[17:55] Jesus does mention tithing three times, I think, that we have recorded for us and each time positively. But I think each time he's speaking about the Pharisees, the religious leaders at the time who were still under the old covenant law and so they were under the tithe.

And I don't think that Christians are commanded to give in the same kind of way. That said, the tithe can still be a good benchmark for Christians to choose to use, to think about our giving.

That we might think of, well, if they used to have to give a tenth as a command, maybe a tenth is a good place for me to start thinking about giving. But some Christians say, well, you should think if a tenth was an appropriate response to God's grace for old covenant believers, is the grace God has shown us as new covenant believers in light of the cross greater or lesser than he showed the old covenant believers?

And what does that mean for my giving as an appropriate response to God's generosity to me in the gospel? So we're free to use the tithe as a personal benchmark of what might be an appropriate response to us, in us, to God's grace.

But the point here in chapter 8 is that instead of using a figure, Paul just holds up a model, a picture of gospel generosity. And it's great to have models in our life like that of what does gospel generosity look like?

[19:26] I really grew in understanding how Christians give. When I was a young Christian working as a trainee lawyer in London and my friend Mark, who was a more mature Christian, was in the same job as me and he said to me he was really happy because he'd worked out his salary was £55,000 a year and he'd worked out what he needed to live in London with simply but with rent levels in London and what they were and the cost of living in London.

And he'd worked out that by giving tax efficiently and in a planned way he was giving towards kingdom work £30,000 a year from a salary of £55,000 a year.

So he was really happy that over half of what his income was was being received by churches and gospel work. It's a model for us. That's not a command, it's a model like the Macedonian churches.

I was listening to a couple of Australians who were on a podcast, Christian guys, talking about giving in the context of churches in Australia, similar context to here. One of the guests said that they've encouraged in their church everyone to really think about what they spend their money on and what is a necessity and what is a luxury.

And he said when you look at the figures in Australia and I guess Scotland would be similar, the average household in Australia spends 20% of their income on entertainment.

[20:57] So by entertainment that would include holidays, dining out, hobbies, coffee shop trips, 20% of their income on entertainment.

And so they're encouraging Christians to think if you divide up your life and think what am I spending on pleasure and entertainment, what would it say about me if that figure is higher than what I'm giving to support the kingdom of God?

It's a model for us. Then on the podcast, the other guy who's this expert on giving got challenged by the interviewer that was listening because he sends his kids to private school and he was saying

well where does that fall in things and is that a necessity, is that a luxury?

Now in Sydney, in the context of Sydney, there are more Christian private schools, there are more schools that are genuinely gospel-centered as private schools and the guy said that he sends his children to private school and pays for that but he said I see that as a luxury, not a necessity so he said this is not a rule for anyone else but my wife and I, we decided as a family when we decided to send our daughters to private school that in every year going forward we will always give more money to the church than we spend on school fees.

So that's how we've tried to guard our own hearts in giving to support the gospel work. So again, it's not a command but it was a model for the people to listen to and think where is my heart when it comes to giving?

[ 22 : 29 ] I think of an elder in a church in London who became a Christian and he couldn't bear the idea of giving 10% of his income to Christian ministries so he thought well I'll give 5% and then I'll add a percent every year, I'll add 1% every year and the last I heard that was 20 years ago so he was giving 25% but it was just his way of growing in the grace of giving.

It's not commanded, these are models and Paul here gives us a model in the Macedonian churches and it makes us ask what would make those churches in Macedonia give in such a generous way that they would set a new standard for giving that exceeded even the Apostle Paul's expectations. We know it was the grace of God in them, verse 1. How does God go to work in us by his grace to move us to think differently about our giving?

Well we come to our third point, the provocative motivation for Christian giving or the glorious motivation for Christian giving. The motivation gloriously is love.

Have a look with me again at verse 8. Paul says, I'm not commanding you but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

[ 23 : 52 ] So Paul says he can test the sincerity of the love of that church by their financial giving. We might want to hold on to our money and show our love for Jesus in other ways but Paul says he can test the sincerity of the love for Jesus by how they're worshipping Jesus with their money.

Now why is that? Is it because money so often has a hold on our hearts? And Paul gets balder still doesn't he in verse 8 because he says he wants to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of other churches.

Imagine if I started doing that this morning. If I describe for us two or three other churches in Glasgow and the number of people going and their economic backgrounds and the amount the congregation gives and said look I'm not commanding you to give more all I'm doing is testing whether the church family here at St Silas do we actually love Jesus by comparing what we give with what those other churches give.

So it's very punchy Paul's approach but let's consider how positive it is as well. That Christian giving is not motivated by a sense of guilt I've got to make up for my sin before God it's not motivated by guilt and it's not motivated even by a sense of need oh there's this disastrous need I better start giving no the primary motivation for Christian giving is love and it means when we feel reluctant to give the place to go is to look at our relationship with Jesus.

If what I'm saying this morning seems like it's just from a completely different world you just couldn't contemplate giving money then the way forward isn't to sort of grit your teeth and start giving it's to look at Jesus what would it look like this week to invest in your relationship with Jesus to meditate on his love for you.

[ 25 : 58 ] So Paul takes us there next look with me at verse 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 through his poverty might become rich that Jesus was spiritually unimaginably rich he spent eternity in heaven a place of overflowing perfect love Father Son and Holy Spirit but he chose to leave those riches and enter our world where there was no room for him thrones for a manger did surrender sapphire paved courts for stable floor thou who was rich beyond all splendor all for love's sake became poor he grew up righteous loving and yet he must have lived his whole life knowing that he was under that death sentence as he read the Old Testament scriptures and he taught his own disciples the Son of Man must be rejected he knew that the day would come when he would be led like a lamb to the slaughter so that by his wounds we would be healed and for all the pictures we could find in art galleries of Jesus in his physical agony on the cross what we can't picture is the spiritual bankruptcy that he experienced as the incomprehensible debt of our sin was paid off by him and he cried out forsaken by God and he gladly did that so that it means for any one of us we can say every day

I'm rich I'm rich even if you lost everything you had materially you could your home could be on fire right now burning down with everything inside it you could get home from church and everything is gone and you could still say I'm rich I've been adopted into God's family I've been set free from the penalty of sin the spirit is at work to free me from the power of sin I've got living hope for the future with my saviour Jesus and it will last forever and you would never get those things from money money can't buy us those things Jesus is the treasure hidden in a field that he describes a man going away and gladly selling everything he has to buy that field for his joy how precious he is makes everything else in your life expendable and giving you that treasure of knowing him cost him everything and he gladly paid that cost God's grace moves us to give generously by replacing the pleasure we feel about having money with the supreme pleasure of knowing the gift of his son the Lord Jesus and knowing how he served us with his riches we can gladly serve others with ours nearly 200 years ago the Scottish preacher Robert

Murray McShane preached a sermon in Edinburgh about giving he said this oh my dear Christians some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true vine if you would be like Christ you must be like him in giving what would have become of us if Christ had been as saving of his blood as some men are of their money you object my money is my own I answer Christ might have said my blood is my own my life is my own then where would we have been you object the poor are undeserving I answer Christ might have said the same thing they are wicked rebels against my father's law shall I lay down my life for these but no he left the 99 and came after the lost he gave his blood for the undeserving you object the poor may abuse it I answer Christ might have said the same yea with far greater truth for he knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet that most would despise it yet he gave his own blood so my dear

Christians give much give often give freely Christ is glorious and happy and so will you be it's not your money I want but your happiness remember his own word it is more blessed to give than to receive let's pray together Lord you know our hearts you know our struggles you know our fears we ask that you would graciously give us a bigger picture of Christ in all his grandeur his glorious majesty his compassionate love for us sinners and the security we find in him sharing his spiritual riches with us that we standing in that grace captured by who he is would be liberated to give eagerly joyfully and sacrificially that our generation would be one for Christ in the power of your spirit we ask these things in Jesus name  
Amen Amen