

GRACIOUS LIVING

2 Corinthians 8:1-24

The story is told of a newcomer to the community was attending a local cattle auction where the auctioneer was expounding on the qualities of what appeared to be a beautiful Guernsey cow. The newcomer was anxious to begin his herd but wanted to ensure he made a good purchase. He turned to an old farmer who seemed to know something about every cow in the auction and queried, "How much does she give?" The old timer replied, "Doesn't give much, but if you can get her in a corner, you can take a lot from her!"

Tragically this story illustrates the experience of many believers who often feel as if they have been coerced into giving by guilt laden messages or appeals to meet the budget or we will have to close shop. Cheerful giving is the result of *gracious* living and *gracious* living is characteristic of those who truly understand the *gracious* nature of life in Christ.

1. Grace Giving Exceeds Natural Ability (1-3)

I imagine that every one of us has fanaticized about being a super-hero. I grew up when Superman was still in vogue and I remember jumping from my porch as if I could fly like superman. We wonder what it would be like to have super human powers; to do something beyond our natural abilities. I have really good news for you, God's grace enables Christians to accomplish ministry beyond our natural capacity.

Paul dedicated the decade of the 50's collecting an offering for the saints in Jerusalem who had been impacted by a devastating famine. This famine is first mention in Acts 11:27 when Agabus comes from Jerusalem to Antioch and predicts a severe famine which would spread across the Roman Empire. The people in Antioch respond immediately by sending a love offering to the saints in Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul. Paul begins to expand the opportunity to give to meet this need to other churches he had founded throughout Macedonia and Achaia. The offering was successfully completed and delivered to Jerusalem by Paul himself (Rom. 15:25-26).

Nearly a year has passed since Paul first gave instructions about this offering (1 Cor. 16) and during that time he had been forced to write a painful letter that had grieved the Corinthians (2 Cor. 7:8). The letter, however, had positive results and they had repented (7:9). With the church restored to health, Paul now devotes two chapters to this discussion of grace giving. The churches in Macedonia were further along in collecting the offering and therefore Paul uses them as a positive example. The churches of Macedonia would have included Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea.

Notice first of all that they had given in spite of their circumstances (8:2). Paul mentions a "great ordeal of affliction" which may refer to persecution which could have caused great poverty among the believers. But their adverse circumstances had served to produce an abundance of joy which created an overflow of liberality. "Joy" and "generosity" are twins. Joy comes from the assurance

of sins forgiven and the contemplation of the grace we have received in Christ. “Generosity” indicates giving that is neither calculated nor pretentious.

The generous giving by the Macedonians was not only motivated by grace received, it was empowered by grace. Notice in verse 3 that they gave “according to their ability, and beyond their ability.” Their giving was “beyond their ability” because it was prompted by (“their own accord”) empowered by the Holy Spirit. The words “grace” and “gracious” are repeated throughout this section. In fact if we were to look back at 1 Corinthians we would find that the Corinthians were zealous for spiritual gifts, often the more miraculous variety, desiring to prove their spirituality. As a corrective, Paul uses a term for spiritual gifts—*charismata*—as a corrective to affirm that all spiritual gifts are the manifestation of God’s grace and thus tell us more about the giver than the recipient.

Look quickly down to verses 6 and 7 where Paul encourages the Corinthian believers to abound in this gracious work as well. Paul is affirming that generous giving is as much a demonstration of the Spirit as prophecy or miracle-working faith.

2. Grace Giving is Motivated by Unique Fellowship (4-6)

The desire of the impoverished Macedonians to give to meet the needs of the saints is made explicit in the phrase, “begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints” (4). Their desire to give was *spontaneous* and genuine, motivated by their desire to minister to the saints in Jerusalem. The saints in Jerusalem were Jewish and many of the members of the Macedonian churches were Gentile. It is unlikely that persons in these Macedonian churches actually knew the saints in the Jerusalem church.

It is clear that Paul was passionate about providing a generous offering for the saints in Jerusalem. When we read the Old Testament we regularly find that the Jews helped their poorer brethren just as Greek religious brotherhoods cared for their own. Wouldn’t it be a poor witness if Christians didn’t demonstrate mutual concern for the poor in their own fellowship? Paul thus has sent Titus to complete this offering allowing the Corinthian church to finish well.

Paul called upon the churches in Achaia and Macedonia to work together because the need was so great that it required an offering too large for any one church. The opportunity to give to a great cause beyond our local needs increases the vision of the local church and allows us to work together in a kingdom-sized venture.

One of the reasons that I love the Cooperative Program is that it begins with the local church and allows each church to participate in mission ventures that far exceed the capacity of any one church as we reach our community, our state, and our world.

3. Grace Giving Proves the Sincerity of One’s Love (7-15)

Paul begins this section with an affirmation that they are a uniquely gifted church. He declares that they abound in everything and includes faith, utterance, and knowledge. We might say this is a “rich” church when it comes to gifts of grace. Paul now exhorts them to abound in this work of grace also.

As an apostle and the founder of the church, Paul had the right to exercise authority in commanding them to participate in this offering. He refrains because he wants this offering to flow from love and prove the sincerity of their love for God. When love is lacking, our giving can degenerate into a legalistic task. Paul will later affirm that God loves a cheerful giver (9:7). God loves for His children to reflect His own gracious character.

Paul now illustrates by speaking of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who possesses all the riches of heaven itself and yet became poor through the incarnation. It was this self-giving act that ultimately led to the cross which enabled us to become rich. When we come to grips with the amazing gift of grace, we are profoundly aware of the riches we have received at Christ's expense. It is this awareness that motivates true giving and proves the sincerity of our love.

Paul desires that they complete the offering with joy and integrity (10-12). They had demonstrated their readiness to give, but had lagged behind in their diligence after Paul left. The standard of giving must be based on the financial resources which God has given the donor (12). The abundant resources available to the Corinthian believers will enable them to supply the needs of those presently experiencing need. He then indicates that there may be a time when those now receiving aid may be the one to provide aid. We sometimes reflect the sentiment of this passage with the phrase, "equal sacrifice, and not equal gifts."

4. Grace Giving Requires and Inspires Integrity (16-24)

Paul further encourages their giving by indicating how this offering will be administered and who will ensure that the offering finds its intended destination. The first name mentioned is Titus, who was a trustworthy friend of Paul and the church at Corinth. Paul mentions two other Christian brothers who will accompany the offering but he only identified them by their character. The first is described as one "whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches" (18). The second brother has been tested and found diligent (22). Both were duly elected representatives of the churches and they served for the glory of Christ (23b).

Why did Paul take such precautions? "We are taking this precaution so no one can find fault with us concerning this large sum administered by us. For we are making provision for what is honorable, not only before the Lord but also before men" (20-21).

Paul was concerned not simply for his own reputation before men, but he knew he was accountable to God.

One of the reasons I have always been an advocate of the Cooperative Program is that it is managed by integrity by people elected by the churches.

There are several characteristics of cooperative giving that we should celebrate.

- a. It requires mutual concern. We are often called upon to give to persons we will never see this side of heaven.

- b. It must be handled with efficiency and integrity.
- c. It has kingdom focus.
- d. It glorifies God because only He can get the credit for it.