

The Grace of Giving (Part 1) (2 Corinthians 8:1-15)

Matthew Williams

“And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before [Jesus] and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” And he said to him, ‘Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth.’ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’” (Mark 10:17-23)

We tend to think of wealth as a good thing. We take comfort when we have it. We despair when we lose it. From the Bible’s perspective, however, it is as much a danger as it is a blessing because it has the potential to destroy your soul. Maybe that’s why Jesus talked about money so much. Think about it. The rich young ruler was ready and willing to follow Jesus in nearly every way, save one – you shall have no other gods before me. It wasn’t that he didn’t love Jesus on some level. He just loved his money more and when forced to choose, he clung to his wealth and forfeited his soul.

Oh, but don’t worry about me, Pastor. I’m not rich. I’m not Wall Street. I’m Main Street. I’m just trying to make ends meet and have a little leftover for a rainy day. Consider this: In 2018, the Washington Post reported, “After adjusting for cost-of-living differences, a typical American still earns an income that is 10 times the income received by the typical person in the world.”

I’m not trying to make anyone listening to me feel guilty for being rich. I am trying to make sure we recognize that when God speaks in his Word to people who are rich, he’s talking to us. But even if you’re not statistically wealthy, the danger remains. 1 Timothy 6:9-10, “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils.”

So what’s the alternative? Desiring to be poor? Abandoning material possessions altogether for life of suffering in a monastery? 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 teaches us the



spiritual opposite of loving money isn't hating money. It's loving God with your money. Serving God with your money. Following Jesus in what you do with your money. It means using all of it to love God and love your neighbor.

For the last month, we've been in a series of sermons called, Sunday Matters. We're taking a close look at some of the key elements of our worship service, asking God to renew our vision for the things he wants us to do as we gather week after week. One of those elements is giving. Every week, we receive an offering to support the gospel ministry God is doing in and through our local church.

If you've grown up in the church, it's easy for giving to become a mindless exercise. Pass the basket and on to the next thing. For others, it's not mindless. It's downright uncomfortable. Maybe you've been in a church environment where it seemed like all they wanted to do was get their hands in your wallet. Maybe you felt manipulated into giving or thought if you only give "X" amount, then God would really bless you.

I'm grateful the Lord hasn't left us without guidance in what it looks like to worship him with our money. Few passages of Scripture are more helpful in this regard than 2 Corinthians 8-9 in establishing a biblical vision for using all of our money to love God and love our neighbor. Here's the context.

In Acts 11, a prophet from Jerusalem named Agabus prophesied that there would be a great famine in the world, which is exactly what happened in the region of Judea during the reign of the Emperor Claudius from AD 41-54. Toward the end of that time period, the Apostle Paul wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians to the church he planted in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, he gives them some explicit instructions.

"Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come." That's the collection Paul's talking about in 2 Corinthians 8. It was a specific offering, for a specific group of people, at a specific point in time. However, the authoritative words the Lord inspired Paul to write continue to serve us today by establishing clear principles for giving in general and what it means to worship God with the resources he has entrusted to us today.



I'm going to mention 9 of them, but I'm not going to cover them all in one sermon. I started out this week trying to do so, but gave up last night. I don't want us to bypass or miss any of the biblical wisdom in this chapter. Giving is too critical of a window into the condition of our soul and too important an act of worship for us to move quickly. So we'll cover 3 today and 6 next Sunday.

Let me say one more thing before we dive in. I'm not preaching this sermon as a word of correction. I don't hesitate to correct us where I believe correction is needed. You are, on the whole, an exceedingly generous church. On behalf of all our elders and deacons, thank you. We have prayed as a church for financial provision and God has provided – again, and again, and again. I believe we're pleasing the Lord in this area, which is why I smile when our financials defy our bank's expectations. May that always be, my friends. Gospel-driven generosity shouldn't "make sense" to the world. It should compel them to join us in following Jesus.

I'm preaching this sermon for three reasons. First, I don't want a year to pass without renewing our vision for what it means to worship God with our money instead of worshiping our money. Second, I believe God has called us to more than paying our monthly bills. We learned how to trust the Lord together during that season and will continue to trust the Lord if it happens again. But that's not where we are right now, friends.

For more than a year now, we've received more than we've spent. That means the conversation and our whole approach to financial stewardship is changing, which we'll talk more about during our members meeting next month. The focus is shifting from, "How can we keep the lights on?" to, "Lord, what strategic priorities both inside and outside these four walls do you want us to get behind in advancing the gospel?" I'm excited to go there together, friends, and enable men and women in our city and around the world to discover the joy of a growing relationship with God through our giving. We're going to need more resources to do that, not less.

Finally, I'm eager to address this topic because I know it's quite possible for a few, faithful members who are exceedingly generous to compensate for others who are not worshiping God with their money. May that never be true of us, brothers and sisters. May all of us, year after year, new members and old members alike, use all of our money to love God and love our neighbor. On all three fronts, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 points us in the right direction.

1) GOD IS THE ULTIMATE GIVER (Verse 1)

Paul opens in verse 1 by directing the Corinthians to the example of the churches in Macedonia, churches in places like Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.” It’s not manipulation. He isn’t playing comparison games to reach the capital campaign goal. He’s reminding the Corinthians, and us, of a foundational principle: God gives first.

It was his grace, his unmerited favor, at work in their lives that enabled the Macedonians to excel in the grace of giving. His giving initiated, compelled, and sustained their own. Before we ever give to God, God gives to us. Acts 17:25, “He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” 1 Corinthians 4:7, “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

The Macedonians stood out as an example of generosity, but it wasn’t because God gave to them in a way that he hasn’t given to us. The point of verse 1 isn’t, “Hey, Corinthians, join me in standing in awe of the Macedonians!” No. It’s more like, “Hey, Corinthians! Hey, KingsWay! Remember and don’t forget that the grace of giving doesn’t start with us. It starts with God.

He’s a God who gives. And we’re only able to give because he first gave to us. We’re only passing along what we have received, which is why Paul doesn’t say, “I want you to know about the Macedonians.” He says, “I want you to know about the grace of God that has been given to the Macedonians.”

Notice it wasn’t a grace given to isolated individuals or a select few in the congregation. It was given to the church as a whole, and not just one church, but a whole group of churches. If you’re a Christian, you never get to say, “I don’t think I have the gift of giving.” Brothers and sisters, if you are a recipient of the grace of God, you have the gift of giving because it’s God who gives us power to give to him and others as he has first given to us.

All that we are and all that we have comes from him – no exceptions. We are debtors to God—for the gift of life, for the gift of Christ and all the blessings of the gospel, for the ability to respond to all God has given us by using all of our money

to love him and love our neighbor. It all comes from him. So if giving is an area you struggle to obey the Lord or to even want to obey the Lord, take heart. He is able to give you the grace you need to worship him with your giving because he's the ultimate Giver.

2) GENEROSITY IS THE FRUIT OF SURPASSING JOY (Verse 2)

How did the grace (the unmerited favor) God gave the Macedonians play out in the practical realm? Verse 2 is stunning. "For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity..." Question: In your life, what do severe tests of affliction tend to produce? Depression? Isolation? Grumbling? Complaining? Self-pity? I think those are the usual suspects.

How about if we throw in some extreme poverty to boot? I'm not talking, "Oh no. How will I pay my cell phone bill this month? My friends will think I'm a horrible person if I can't send 5,000 text messages." I'm talking about looking at your family in the morning and saying, "Guys, I don't know if we'll have any food to eat today." An estimated 413 million people in sub-Saharan Africa are trying to survive on less than \$1.90/day. That's the kind of poverty Paul is talking about.

Severe affliction? Check. Extreme poverty? Check. But the Macedonians also had something else. Abundance of joy. Not grim resignation. Not the absence of complaining. Joy. And an abundance of joy at that! Where in the world did THAT come from? Psalm 4:6-7, "There are many who say, 'Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!' You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." Psalm 73:25-26, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The Macedonians had next to no material possessions. But you know what they had? They had Jesus. They knew Jesus. They had tasted and seen that the Lord is good and that relationship with him, having him, loving him, even if you lose everything else, is still gain. Paul was willing to suffer the loss of all things to gain Christ, not just because it was "right" or what you're "supposed" to say. It's because it's true. Psalm 16:11, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."



If you haven't experienced that, my friend. If you hear me say as much and think, "Matthew, you're crazy." It may very well be because you don't actually know Jesus. Knowing Jesus doesn't take away the pain of poverty. Severe affliction still hurts, and I for one am exceedingly grateful Paul didn't talk about their abundance of joy as if it lived in some kind of sanitized vacuum. It was real joy in the midst of real suffering from knowing a real Savior. And what did it produce? Verse 2, "a wealth of generosity!"

How does that work? It's supernatural, but it's also simple. When you have next to no money, yet you still have abundant joy, what do you begin to realize at a deep level? Money isn't the source of real joy. Jesus is. We come to realize he's our provider. He's our deliverer. He's our security. He's our refuge. He's the stability of our times. He's our treasure. Not a flush bank account, a balanced budget, a well-stocked pantry, an emergency fund, life insurance, or an IRA.

Does that mean those things are bad? No. They can be a tremendous blessing. Is it tempting to make them our functional god and spend our entire life looking to financial security in this world for the contentment only Jesus can give us? Yes. Is it easy to think Jesus is our joy, but immediately become anxious or panic when our financial situation is threatened, revealing we were really loving our money the whole time? Yes.

Can wealth ultimately deliver on the abiding joy and contentment it seems to offer? No. Can it grant you an unshakeable gladness that no sorrow or suffering or stock market crash can ever defeat or take away? No. Is that precisely what we discover in Jesus and him alone? Yes. Why? Because you weren't created to love money, friend, you were created to love the Lord. Only he can satisfy your soul.

Discovering surpassing joy in Jesus sets us free in two respects. It frees us from worshiping money, and it frees us to worship the Lord with our money. Notice their abundant joy and extreme poverty didn't overflow in some sort of quiet contentment. "Man, it would sure be nice to have something to give, but at least I have Jesus." NO! Abundance of joy and extreme poverty overflowed in "a wealth of generosity." They couldn't help but take what little they had and devote it to loving the Lord and those he died to save.

It was a joy to celebrate Josh & Rachel's engagement this morning. Let me tell you something I've noticed about engaged couples. I have yet to hear a guy who's bought his girl a ring say, "Man, I really hate to give such an expensive piece of

jewelry to her. I mean, who does she think she is? Why in the world would I drop so much hard-earned cash? Guys about to propose don't talk like that. What do they say? "Guess what, Matthew. I bought the ring!" "Are you serious?" "Oh yeah. I've never paid more money for something in my entire life and I CANNOT WAIT to give it to her. I've never loved a woman like this before."

Giving her a ring isn't a burden. It's a joy. Why? Because he loves her. She brings him great joy. No sacrifice is too great to bless, nurture, and protect the things we love the most. We love to spend money on and give money to the things that bring us joy. The same principle holds true in our relationship with the Lord. When Jesus is your surpassing joy, it's not hard to overflow in a wealth of generosity toward him and those he died to save. It's a delight. It's a privilege. There's nothing we would rather do.

Biblical generosity isn't the fruit of wealth. It's the fruit of surpassing joy in Jesus, a joy that delivers us clutching our money and frees us to love him and his people with all he has entrusted to us. He's the pearl of great price. He's the treasure hidden in the field. He's the only one who can satisfy your soul and in him is fullness of joy.

3) THE GIVING THAT PLEASES GOD IS PROPORTIONAL AND VOLUNTARY (Verses 3-4)

What do we tend to think? Isn't generosity for, you know, wealthy people? I mean, I'm try to be a nice guy, but man, I don't have anything to give. I can hardly keep up with my medical bills! Look at verse 3. "For they gave according to their means..."

Remember what I just said. Giving isn't the fruit of wealth. It isn't the fruit of financial excess. It's the fruit of abundant joy in Jesus. The poor widow in Luke 21 had abundant joy in Jesus. So what did she do? She put in two copper coins. To which Jesus said, "Move over, Lady. There's a really rich guy behind you with two bags of gold. Step right this way, Sir. I'd like to offer you a very special place in my kingdom starting with an engraved stone in the new heavens and the new earth." No. Her giving melted his heart. Why? Because from a proportional standpoint, she gave more than all the rich people.

There are two kinds of gifts that consistently bring me to tears. The first are gifts I've received from church members on fixed incomes. The second are gifts from my children. When one of my boys takes half the money he owns and buys me a



chocolate bar, I don't say, "Come on, Son, why couldn't you give me a new sound bar like my dad." It melts my heart. His giving fills me with joy – not because of how it measures up to other people's gifts, but because of the proportion it represents of all he has. Our Heavenly Father is no different.

Friend, don't be discouraged by your inability to give much relative to other people around you. Give according to your means. And as the Lord puts it on your heart, give beyond your means. Not foolishly. Not blindly. Proportionally. Don't begrudge the providence that has seen fit to give you 1 talent and your friend 10. The master in his perfect wisdom decides what to entrust to each of us. We're responsible for being faithful with what he has given.

And when you give, take care it's not begrudging or transactional. "Alright, alright, you want 10%. Fine! Here it is. Now you better help me pay that rent on time." The giving that pleases God is giving of our own accord. 2 Corinthians 9:7, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." The Macedonians didn't have to be cajoled. They didn't have to be pressured and Paul refused to do so. In fact, verse 4, they were "begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints." What? Begging for the privilege of giving? Why would we ever do that?

Because giving to meet the spiritual and physical needs of the men and women around us, is a tremendous privilege. Think about it. When we give to release pastors into full-time ministry so they can spend their week studying God's Word and bringing crazy things like 9-point sermons to feed the church, what happens? We understand God's Word in a deeper way (myself included) so together we can obey God's Word in a deeper way. That brings serious glory God and good to his people!

When we give to relieve the needs of the poor in our own church and the surrounding community by releasing a staff deacon like Craig into full-time ministry, or building a benevolence fund out of which we can meet material needs in Jesus' name, what happens? Christians and non-Christians alike taste and see that the Lord is good. He sees them. He's aware of their situation. He knows what they need. And he's using his body, the church, to care for their needs because he's a faithful God!

When we give to build and pay off a facility like this, what happens? We establish a base of gospel ministry that will serve not just our church today, but our church for



generations to come. A place where we can train pastors, plant churches, and devote resources to global missions that would otherwise be spent on renting a school or movie theater. It's a short-term sacrifice for a long-term gain.

When we give to support the work God is doing in and through our little denomination, what happens? We get reports like the one I did at our Pastor's Conference this fall that we're presently serving pastors and churches in some 31 countries around the world, a number of whom are eager to be adopted into Sovereign Grace because they share our vision and values, especially our commitment to gospel-centered ministry built on the careful exposition of God's Word.

And then we get to support church plants like the one Jorge and David Del Castillo are launching this month in Santa Cruz, not just with our prayers, but with financial resources. Why? Because we believe Jesus is on a mission to save men and women in another city, who speak another language, who we may never meet in person, but who the Bible tells us were made to find their greatest joy in knowing and loving Him!

I could go on and on. What's the point? When joy in Jesus and the magnification of his supremacy and glory capture our hearts, taking all our money and using it to love God and love our neighbor isn't a burden. It isn't a duty. It's a tremendous privilege! The giving that pleases God is proportional and voluntary. It's not something we have to do. It's something we want to do.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the purpose of money starts with discovering what it means to worship God with our money. He points us in the right direction in 1 Corinthians 8. First, we need to remember that God is the ultimate giver. Unless he gives to us, we have neither the substance nor the will to give to others. He has generously lavished grace on us in Christ Jesus, giving us all the spiritual and material resources we need to practice generosity in return.

A wealth of generosity is only possible if Jesus, and not money, is your surpassing joy. Unless you love him first and best, you'll never be able to honor God with your money because you'll be too busy using it to worship something else. But if Jesus is your joy, if Jesus is your delight, then whether you are swimming in riches, suffering



in extreme poverty, or somewhere in between, you will overflow in a “wealth of generosity.”

It’s not about how much you give compared to other people. It’s about how much you give compared to all the Lord has entrusted to you. The giving that pleases the Lord is proportional and voluntary. He wants all of you, friend. Your whole heart. Your whole mind. Your whole wallet. He’s not satisfied with a 10% handout. He’s our King. He’s our Lord. All that we are and all that we have is his. We’ll pick up there next Sunday.

Between now and then, I want you to wrestle with a simple question: Is my life characterized by a wealth of financial generosity toward God and others, even if I’m relatively poor? Or is some other treasure besides Jesus sitting on the throne of your heart and stealing the resources that would otherwise be devoted to worshiping him? That’s where we have to start – with an honest assessment of our hearts, aided by the provoking example of the Macedonians. Let’s pray and ask for God’s help to do that.