

¹ We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 2

Corinthians 8:1,2 It was the custom of the Jews to journey to Jerusalem if they knew they would soon die. To be buried there was to be buried where they believed the dead would first be raised (Ezekiel 37:3-5ⁱ). Husband and wife would move to Jerusalem and then as now the husband would usually be the first to die. This meant there were many widows who were left with little or no means of support. The temple provided a meager ration of food to sustain them.

When Christianity began to be seen as different from Judaism, the church needed to support the Christian widows. We see that situation in Acts 6ⁱⁱ. That is one reason James, the leader of the early church, asked Paul to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10ⁱⁱⁱ).

That is why Paul took a collection for the poor in Jerusalem from the diaspora churches. He had previously informed the Corinthians about the need. He shared the example of the churches of Macedonia that revealed the grace of God so that they also might respond to that same grace. Those churches had acted on the grace of generosity. **God's grace to be sacrificially generous is given to all those who are in Christ. Some will act on it and others will not.** Paul's hope is that the way the Macedonians responded would inspire the Corinthians to act on the same grace.

The word "grace" occurs eight times in this chapter and the next, and five of those occur in the first nine verses in this chapter. It is evident that Paul saw generous giving as a product of the grace of God in our lives. The natural order of man is to be selfish. God's grace in our hearts causes us to rise above our natural tendency.

The Macedonia churches were experiencing a time of severe affliction. Paul calls it a test, for affliction tests our spiritual maturity and builds endurance (Romans 5:3^{iv}). When Paul writes of "severe test of affliction," we can hardly imagine the pressure they must have been under. The Greek word gives the sense of being crushed by life. We would consider what they endured as unbearable.

They were also experiencing extreme poverty. *The great turn-of-the-century New Testament scholar Alfred Plummer translated it perfectly as "their down-to-the-depth poverty." They were at the bottom—dirt-poor! For most of us, it is a major stretch to relate to deep poverty in an ancient setting.* If you have only a couple decent meals a day and a few changes of clothes and transportation is available to you, you are probably much better off than they were.

And yet, they gave to the extent that we would not imagine possible and that out of an abundance of joy! We have little trials those people would think were nothing. They knew what it was like to be blamed for any natural calamity that happened. They knew the persecution of being fired simply because you would not worship the god of the guild. They experienced being shunned by the community and were extremely poor and yet they had an abundance of joy. They knew this world is passing and that to be persecuted for the sake of Christ was to be richly blessed (1 John 2:17^{vi}; James 1:12^{vii}).

If we are not experiencing the second fruit of the Spirit, which is joy (Galatians 5:22^{viii}), it means that there is something amiss in our spiritual life. I am not talking about being happy. Happiness depends on circumstances. Joy is deeper than that. It comes from

your spirit being in fellowship with the Spirit of God. It sings Jesus Loves Me! It knows all things work together for good to those who love God (Romans 8:28^{ix}). It is a product of faith in Jesus who paid our ransom and promises us eternity in His loving, holy presence (John 14:3^x). It comes from eyes of faith seeing God at work and the glorious opportunity to join Him in that work. It is knowing you are in the hands of Almighty God and could not be any safer.

Out of that abundant joy while suffering extreme poverty the grace of God produced an overflow in a wealth of generosity from them. They knew as bad as their circumstances were, the Jerusalem widows had it even worse. They embraced the grace of generosity and acted on it!

³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, 2 Corinthians 8:3-5a Paul must have been led of the Spirit to share with the Macedonians about the need in Jerusalem and the conditions there, possibly to encourage them that some saints are even worse off physically than they were. Sometimes we think we have it tough until we meet someone going through something much greater. Hearing of the need, the congregations wanted to help.

I imagine Paul telling them that funds could be raised from wealthier churches, but they insisted, earnestly begging them for the favor of joining God in this relief effort. Can you imagine? Paul may have tried to turn them down out of sympathy for their condition. He may have said, “No really, other churches can afford to do this. No need for you to participate. I was not telling you so that you would give.” And the elders answer, “But we want to give! Do not rob us of the privilege of participating in meeting the needs of our sisters in Jerusalem!” Paul tries to argue with them as they shove the money into his hand. When Paul privately joins his team, he counts the offering with them, and they are all amazed. How could they give so much? They are barely have enough to eat! And then Paul must explain to his team how he tried to reject the gift and their insistence to give it. Grant you, that is just how I imagine it. From the wording of the passage, it must have been something similar to that.

^{5b} but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. 2 Corinthians 8:5b How is such magnanimous giving possible? Why is it that those who have the least seem to give a greater percentage? They gave themselves first to the Lord! That is where the grace of giving comes from. He is the great Giver. Paul wrote, “*What do you have that you did not receive*” (1 Corinthians 4:7^{xi})? Life, health, sight, mobility, sustenance, skills, finances, shelter, clothing, a mind, the Bible, salvation, eternal life, the Holy Spirit, fellowship... count your blessings name them one by one, count your blessings see what God has done! O to be as grateful as these Macedonians, to beg for the opportunity to give! Grace can prompt our hearts, but it is the grateful heart that joyfully embraces the invitation and acts on it. We must give ourselves to the Lord first.

Verse five ends with a phrase that troubles me. It is not because I doubt it to be God’s Word, but because I have seen it abused so often. “... *gave themselves...by the will of God to us.*” The Macedonian churches gave themselves first to the Lord and then to Paul and his team. If the verse did not say, “first to the Lord,” it would be blasphemy. We do not give ourselves to people first. But when we are following Biblical leadership, it is by the will of God that we give ourselves to them. That is the same thing Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:1. *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.* That does not mean that we

follow them blindly or do not test what they teach with the Word of God. The author of Hebrews tells us to submit ourselves to the elders and obey them (Hebrews 13:17^{xii}). That is of course conditioned upon us following Christ and giving ourselves to the Lord first.

That puts a huge responsibility on the shoulders of elders to be sure that they humbly follow the Lord. Otherwise, we end up with a cult of man followers, and that is the last thing a godly leader would want. It would break his heart. Remember Paul and Barnabas rending their clothes and pleading for the people of Lystra not to worship them (Acts 14:14,15^{xiii}).

Paul was bringing up the Macedonian churches' commitment to him and his team because the Corinthians had just had that relationship restored. That was necessary before he asked them to give to the need. They had to have faith that it was a Spirit led endeavor. If a church does not trust its elders to seek God's direction for the church, there will be no unity and little if any fruit that remains (John 15:16^{xiv}).

⁶Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. 2 Corinthians 8:6 Paul had asked Titus to remind the Corinthians about participating in this collection for the Jerusalem church. He was to be the one to return and take up the collection. Now that the church had given themselves to Paul's ministry, he lets them know Titus will return to take up the collection.

Titus is a Greek name. This church consisted mostly of Gentiles. It was the wisdom from God that had Paul send someone who could relate to the struggles and influences on the church and help them see God's will to overcome those temptations and hardships. They trusted Titus. He was the obvious one to complete the collection.

⁷But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. 2 Corinthians 8:7 Paul's first letter told of the desire the Corinthians had for spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:12^{xv}). Here he commends them for how they excel in several of those gifts. Faith comes from hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17^{xvi}), but it is also a gift. Some people have supernatural faith to believe God. Their prayers are often answered.

The Corinthians also excelled in speech. They could clearly express the gospel in a way that could be understood. The elders must have been excellent preachers, for they excelled in knowledge. Paul may be referring to a gift of the Spirit, in which case that would mean supernatural insight into situations people faced.

One gift I wish for every believer is earnestness. They were passionate about following the Lord. Earnest people often question if they are doing all they should be doing for the Lord. That is why the Corinthians may have been enticed by the purveyors of keeping the Laws of Moses. The desire to do God's will is from God. But recognize that it is often found in everyday activities done to God's glory.

The last expression is written differently in some manuscripts. ESV has "in *our* love for you" while some manuscripts have "in *your* love for us." The latter fits the sentence structure better.

Paul then challenges them that to excel in this act of grace also, referring to generosity. It is my profound joy to say that this church excels in that gift. Very few churches give as high a percentage as we do to missions. We had an excellent offering for the Gideons, greater than in the past. Your giving is not only financial but also in the form of meals for Wednesday evening group, in your time helping those in need, especially the elderly as they enter those final stages of life. Time is one of our most

precious commodities, and despite busy schedules, many of you are willing to give what little extra time you have. Many of you excel in this act of grace. There are so many needs. May God bless you for giving of yourselves to meet them as the hands and feet of Jesus. There will always be more needs than people with time available to meet them.

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 2 Corinthians 8:8 Paul was not commanding them to give. God loves a cheerful giver (9:6^{xvii}). He does not demand that we sacrifice. If we give grudgingly, it means our heart is not in it. Know that if leadership demands you give, they are out of line. God invites us to give so that we may receive a blessing. The Corinthian offering given in earnestness would demonstrate how genuine their love is for the Lord and for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. John the Beloved wrote in one of his letters that if we see a brother in need and do not have compassion, how can we claim the love of God is in us (1 John 3:17^{xviii})? Not only would a gift demonstrate their love was genuine, but it gives evidence of their faith as well.

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 by his poverty might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9 Our example in every aspect of life is our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul could have used his own example, but he used the best one instead. Christ was rich is an understatement. All things belong to God. Jesus was rich in glory. He was rich in eternal things. But He forsook it all to become one of us, living in a poor family, and laboring with his hands. In some ways He amassed wealth again, wealth in friendships and in influence. But He emptied Himself again to leave it all to hang forsaken on a cross so that we might be forgiven. That forgiveness provides true wealth, a relationship with God, His guidance in our lives, eternal abundant life, the promise of heaven, a family of fellow believers. Jesus told the disciples that for everything that they left, they would have 100 times as much (Matthew 19:29^{xix}). He was not talking about the prosperity gospel, but about things that are eternal. Giving up the temporal for the eternal is great gain!

This is very personal. Jesus gave up more than we can comprehend out of love for you. He went from the highest heights to the lowest depths to have you with Him forever. No one could show greater love than that (John 15:13^{xx}). We need to meditate on this wonder because love received produces love in our hearts. The more we realize how greatly we are loved, the more we will love Him in return. Do not be afraid to let the fulness of His love take hold of your heart and mind. **The glorious King of heaven gave His all for us; how can we give less than our all in return?**

The fear of God is a great motivation to do what is right, but the love of God received in our hearts is even more powerful in transforming our lives. Jesus gave His all for you. What will you give Him in return? He asks for a marital kind of relationship (Ephesians 5:31,32^{xxi}). I always tell couples thinking of marriage that marriage is not 50/50. It is 100/100; each partner must give all. And that is the relationship our merciful Savior wants to have with us.

¹⁰ And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹ So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. 2 Corinthians 8:10,11 Paul tells them that giving will benefit them. They will receive that spirit of gracious giving. They will participate with God in meeting the need

in Jerusalem and receive heavenly rewards that are much more than earthly gain. Giving benefits us. I think if we realized this, we would be more open to grace giving.

They had started the collection a year earlier, Titus had reminded them of it, and now Paul tells them to finish the task. He wanted to see readiness backed by carrying out the collection. Sometimes we are eager to do something sacrificial but never get around to it. Paul is telling them, “Get er done!”

¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. 2 Corinthians 8:12 Paul added that they should do so out of what they have. I have experienced churches that have faith pledges. They ask you to by faith tell what you will give over the coming year. I suppose there is nothing wrong with that. But Paul is telling them not to wait until they have more, just do it now with what you have. Putting a sacrifice off into the future can be a way of avoiding it, or at least hoping it will be less costly in the future. **Do what God prompts you to do now!**

Giving throughout Scripture is a percentage, not a set amount. The exception was the temple tax and redemption offering which were quite small. A percentage is fair because it is proportional. It is less of a burden on the poor and a greater amount for those who can afford it. Remember the widow’s mite (Mark 12:44^{xxii}). Her tiny offering was greater in God’s eyes than the huge donations of the wealthy. That is because it was all she had.

¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. 2 Corinthians 9:13,14 God’s heart is for us to care for one another. He does not want you to be burdened financially so someone else will have more than enough. When we have extra, it is usually so that we can help others. Perhaps the abundance of Jerusalem was the teaching on the life of Jesus that came from the Apostles who remained there. If they were providing spiritual food but lacking physical food, it was only right to meet their need (1 Corinthians 9:11^{xxiii}). That is fairness.

¹⁵ As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” 2 Corinthians 8:15 Paul ends this paragraph with a passage from Exodus (16:18^{xxiv}). It is another of those eternal truths that come from a conclusion reached in understanding the deeper meaning of a verse from the Law. This one was about the gathering of manna. The Jews in the wilderness were supposed to gather about 2 quarts of manna for each person every morning. It seemed like some people gathered more and others less. You can just imagine some early risers trying to get out there and get a little more than others. But when they measured it out, somehow it turned out that each person had two quarts. That is an unexplainable miracle.

Paul looked at that Scripture to see the heart of God behind the miracle. He realized God did that to show His heart for each person to have enough. **How that miracle takes place in the church today is in the form of grace giving.** It is just as big of miracle as manna when the heart of selfish mankind accepts the grace to be generous.

This church has several ways we give from the general offering. We have a mission fund, a portion of which cares for the poor through local missions, and the rest which goes to support missionaries sharing the good news of Jesus. We also have a benevolent fund to help the poor through a one-time crisis. But unlike most churches, we also encourage you to give where you think God is leading you to give. If He puts

something on your heart, such as a neighbor in need, or a crisis being met by a Christian organization, or whatever, do some background checking to make sure it is legitimate and then do as the Lord leads you.

We have a responsibility to provide for our own (1 Timothy 5:8^{xxv}), to support the church, and to save so as to not be a burden on others (Proverbs 6:6-8^{xxvi}), but we also have this gift from God to be grace givers. In doing so there is fairness, and as Paul declared in verse 10, “*this benefits you.*” Only those who live a life of faith and belief in God’s Word will hear and then act on those promptings. When we do, the One who made us spiritually rich is glorified, and our love is proven to be genuine.

Questions:

- 1 What was the Macedonian example?
- 2 What enables us to be generous?
- 3 What is the source of abiding joy?
- 4 What is the source of grace giving?
- 5 What was Paul asking them to excel in?
- 6 What kind of relationship does Jesus want with us?
- 7 What must follow readiness?
- 8 Why does God ask us to give proportionally?
- 9 Explain Paul’s use of Scripture in verse 15.
- 10 How does the miracle take place today?

ⁱ **Ezekiel 37:3-5 (ESV)**

³ And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”

⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

ⁱⁱ **Acts 6:1 (ESV)**

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Galatians 2:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

^{iv} **Romans 5:3 (ESV)**

³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

^v R. Kent Hughes, [2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 157.

^{vi} **1 John 2:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

^{vii} **James 1:12 (KJV)**

¹² Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

^{viii} **Galatians 5:22 (ESV)**

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

^{ix} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^x **John 14:3 (ESV)**

³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

^{xi} **1 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV)**

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?

^{xii} **Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

^{xiii} **Acts 14:14-15 (ESV)**

¹⁴ But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, ¹⁵ “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.

^{xiv} **John 15:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

^{xv} **1 Corinthians 14:12 (ESV)**

¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

^{xvi} **Romans 10:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

^{xvii} **2 Corinthians 9:6 (ESV)**

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

^{xviii} **1 John 3:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?

^{xix} **Matthew 19:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.

^{xx} **John 15:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

^{xxi} **Ephesians 5:31-32 (ESV)**

³¹ “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

^{xxii} **Mark 12:44 (ESV)**

⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

^{xxiii} **1 Corinthians 9:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

^{xxiv} **Exodus 16:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.

^{xxv} **1 Timothy 5:8 (ESV)**

⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

^{xxvi} **Proverbs 6:6-8 (ESV)**

⁶ Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. ⁷ Without having any chief, officer, or ruler,

⁸ she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.