

**The Overflow of Joy**

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

July 29, 2007

Oh no—a GIVING sermon in the middle of the summer! Calm down, now. It will be OK!

We need to get the big picture here! We need to get the big picture which all has to do with **the glory of God.**

For nearly 2,000 years, God groomed the Jewish people for the privilege of being the ones who received His law, His word and finally His Son.

Then He comes. He lives, He teaches, He heals, He does the Father's will and He dies on the cross. He rises from the tomb three days later and the message of Jesus goes forth from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and outward to the surrounding world.

With Judea part of the Roman Empire, it was natural that the gospel spread first within its protected borders. So we see it going out to Syria and Egypt and Asia Minor and Greece.

And it was just at this point that a great famine came. In Acts 11, the prophet Agabus predicted this famine. While it affected the whole Roman world, Judea, Samaria and Galilee were hardest hit. Season after season came and went with little rain and failed crops.

The apostle Paul decided to do something about the plight of the poor in Judea, in particular the poor believers in Messiah Jesus. Everywhere he went, he encouraged the mostly Gentile churches he ministered with to take up an offering for these destitute Jewish believers in the land of Jesus. Before he even visited Rome, he encouraged them to do the same (Romans 15:25-32). He encouraged the

churches of Galatia to give. He encouraged the Macedonian churches to give (that would include the churches at Philippi and Thessalonica) and he encouraged the Corinthian church to give.

The first place he did this was in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2:

*1 Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*

Why was Paul so emphatic about the importance of this offering? And what does this ancient relief offering have for us today? What does it teach us?

It must be important. Paul devotes 2 chapters to it, and so I'll devote three messages to it.

What I see here is that Paul believes that giving is one way, just one of many, that God uses to **bring more of His holiness into our lives**. Paul also sees this special offering as an **opportunity to strengthen the bonds of unity between Jewish and Gentile believers**. Finally, Paul sees this particular offering as a way for Gentile believers to **express their gratitude to the Jews** for the spiritual blessings they have received through faith in the Messiah of Israel. All these together would contribute to **God receiving the praise and glory** that He richly deserves.

Paul urges the Corinthians believers to be generous givers in three ways. **First**, he urges them to match the generosity of the churches in Northern Greece (Macedonia); **second**, he has them consider the example of Jesus Himself, who "became poor, so that you might

become rich”; **finally**, he urges them to give because now was the time to “finish the work.”

### **Matching the Macedonian Model**

(2 Corinthians 8:1-8)

First, look to vs. 1-8:

*1And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. 5And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. 6So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. 8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.*

Look at the churches in Macedonia, says Paul. He’s not urging some kind of giving competition; he’s urging them to copy their responsiveness to God. They gave because of their love for God, and he wants the Corinthians—and us—to do the same.

This kind of giving comes from joy; the joy comes from love, and the love comes from the grace of God. Note in vs. 1 what Paul says:

*...we want you to know about the **grace** that God has given the Macedonian churches.*

Their generosity toward God's work and God's people can be traced back—to God Himself! **Grace** is when God gives something to human beings with no strings attached. **Grace** empowers us to go way beyond anything of human origin. So it starts with God's **grace**.

Then it turns into **joy**. Vs. 2 talks about their "overflowing joy." This is joy in the Lord, not joy in their circumstances. Their circumstances are described as "severe trial" and "extreme poverty."

Did you notice that Paul calls it "**overflowing**" joy? It's not just enough joy. It's "my cup runs over" kind of joy. So what did they do with the overflow? Look again to vs. 3-4:

*3For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*

They begged to give. It wasn't because of the PR firm that Paul hired to target key givers. It wasn't because of the slick DVD on the plight of Jewish believers that Paul showed them. It wasn't because it was tax deductible!

**Their giving was a result of a direct response to God Himself.** They gave because of the work of the Spirit in their lives.

Now Paul says, hey, you Corinthians, this is the way it's supposed to work. You don't give to God's work because of what you get in return (programs, buildings, music, sermons) and you don't give out of guilt, or to support the budget, or duty or obligation. You give out of love of God. You give because you have received the grace of God, because you have the joy of God, and therefore you want to

participate in the work of God, and bless God's people whenever you can.

I have a friend who's on the board of a church here in southern California. He used to raise funds for a non-profit corporation, so when it was time to do a stewardship campaign, they asked him if he would take the lead. He came to the next meeting with a plan: they would shoot footage of various ministries, how people's lives had been touched and so on, and show that. They would produce brochures along the same line.

Well, their pastor was at that second meeting. Before my friend was to present his proposal, the moderator said, "I've asked the pastor to share a few thoughts on the Biblical teaching on giving." Now this guy has a Ph.D. in New Testament, and he spent a few minutes on this very passage. And he said pretty much what I just said: we give from overflowing joy grounded in the grace of God. We give as a direct response to God.

My friend took his file with all his plans and put them back in his briefcase. He realized that his whole approach was to ask people to **give** because of what they **got** for their money. And that's not God's way. It's a radically different way of looking at giving. Whoever our giving immediately benefits, in God's design, **giving is motivated by the grace and love of God, and it's supposed to be a direct response to God.**

There's a second motivation for giving that Paul gives here, packed tight into just one powerful verse:

**Following the Example of Jesus**  
(2 Corinthians 8:9)

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

This is a beautiful expression of why Jesus came into the world. He gave up the riches of heaven and became poor so that we, who are spiritual paupers, can get the riches of the kingdom of heaven.

God wants us to imitate the example of Jesus Himself when it comes to giving. He set aside His own rights and privileges for the sake of meeting the needs of others.

What poverty did we have?

We were lost in sin (Ephesians 2:1) and "were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12).

What riches does He have that He gave us?

The riches of God's glory (Romans 9:23, Ephesians 1:18, 3:16); the riches of God's wisdom (Romans 11:13); the riches of God's grace (Ephesians 1:7, 2:7); and the riches of God's mercy (Ephesians 2:4). And according to Luke 16:11, Jesus alone gives "true riches."

What was the cost to Jesus to transfer His riches to us, to displace our poverty with His wealth? It was the cross. It was laying down His life.

I never get tired of the cross of Jesus. It is my hope and my joy as God's appointed way to transfer heavenly riches to earth. But there's another aspect of the cross. The cross is our pattern to live by. Unless we get this, we will not at all understand God's will for our lives.

Many years ago a godly man by the name of B.B. Warfield wrote some timeless words about this:

*Now dear Christians, some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true Vine; to be made all over again in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like Him in giving... "though He was rich, yet for our sakes He made Himself poor."*

*Objection 1: "My money is my own."  
Answer: Christ might have said, "My blood is My own, my life is My own"...then where should we have been?"*

*Objection 2: "The poor are undeserving."  
Answer: Christ might have said, "They are wicked rebels...shall I lay down my life for these?"*

*Objection 3: "The poor may abuse it."  
Answer: Christ might have said the same, with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample His blood under their feet; that most would despise it; yet He gave His own blood. Oh, my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and poor, the thankless and the undeserving, Christ is glorious and happy and so will you be!*

Giving imitates the priorities of Jesus. It imitates the objective of the cross. The cross sets a high standard: we don't give our excess; we give from our reserves. That's the kind of God-trusting giving that blesses people and brings joy to the heart of God.

Now let's move on to the last portion of this passage:

**Therefore, Finish the Work**  
(2 Corinthians 8:10-15)

Let's start by looking at vs. 10-12:

*10And here is my advice [opinion, 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. 11Now **finish the work**, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. 12For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.*

"Finish the work." Get on with it. You started well; keep it up. Hang in there; don't give up. There's a world to win and bless for Christ. Don't be deterred.

Want to hear some shocking statistics about giving? In 1916, American Protestants gave 2.9% of their income to their churches. When the Depression hit, you would have expected that to go down—but it didn't. In 1933, they gave 3.2%.

Fast forward to 2000. Americans by then were 450% richer, even after taxes and inflation are taken into account. And American Protestants were giving at the rate of 2.6% of their income—a lower level than in the depression or during the First World War.

On the other hand, if you used the figures from 2000, and the same people were giving at the Biblically mandated level of the tithe, there would have been an additional \$139 **billion** flowing into the work of the Kingdom.

Do you think that the Lord may be saying to us today, "Finish the work"? The work then was to meet the needs of those poor believers in Judea. What's the work today? It's the evangelization of the world. It is making Christ

known in Temple City and in Thailand. It is making Him known in Arcadia and in Algeria.

My heart aches for lost people. Does your heart ache as well? Or does a message on giving make you feel like just another appeal for money? Do you feel "hard pressed"? Read what Paul says in vs. 13-15:

*13Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are **hard pressed**, but that there might be equality. 14At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, 15as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*

Paul's intention wasn't to "stick it to them", and neither is that my intention. He tells us that when we respond to God in this way, both parties receive a blessing. Wealthy Greeks giving to poor Jews bless those Jewish believers; the blessing flows back in that the very message of Jesus starts in Judea and flows out from there, changing the world.

And your joyful giving blesses others. It blesses kids and families and marriages. It compounds our joy in the Lord. It multiplies it.

My prayer is that God will free you from a stunted "meet the budget" view of giving toward a "grace, then joy, then joyful giving" view of giving. May God give you a fresh, Christ-exalting vision of God's purposes, and your place in His purposes—the place of your priorities, the place of your prayers and the place of your giving. May the cross be your only boast and may the cross be your measure of all your giving.

**END/PRAYER**