

Excel in the Grace of Giving

Scripture Passage: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. (2) In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. (3) For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, (4) they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. (5) And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. (6) So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. (7) 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.

Introduction

I like bucket lists. I like lists of all kinds. To-do lists happen to be my favorite because I love that feeling of accomplishment when I have completed something. In fact, I write things down I have already done just to cross them off. There is such satisfaction to knowing I have completed something on my to-do list.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to officiate my friend's wedding. After the wedding ceremony, my friend hugged me and said, "Thank you! Now you can cross officiating a wedding off of your bucket list." While I appreciated the opportunity to be a part of such a special day, something about her words did not sit well with me. I was not officiating her wedding because I wanted to cross it off my bucket list. As a pastor, it was a blessing to officiate the wedding of my dear friend.

The purpose of bucket lists is to bring direction, focus, and purpose to our life. While bucket lists inspire intentionality, they primarily focus us on accomplishing various tasks before we die. I support setting goals, especially if those goals lead us to living a more meaningful life. However, having a bucket list sometimes results in an unintended outcome. Bucket lists can get us thinking, "Now I have completed x, y, and z. I am done; I am finished."

If we operate with a "Bucket List mindset," when it comes to giving, we cannot truly become the generous givers we are called to be. We must shift our thinking. To excel in the grace of giving means more than giving in order to cross it off our list. Generosity must become so engrained in who we are we do not think twice before giving. As the people of God, how we

use our resources—our time, money, talents, and attention—reflects what we believe about God and God’s actions in the world. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, Paul wants the actions of the Corinthians to be a reflection of the gospel.

Message

Paul’s message to the Corinthians included Paul’s concern about the monetary offering for the Jerusalem church. In Galatians 2:10, Paul specifies that remembering the poor was something he was eager to do from the beginning. In Romans 15, one notices that Paul considers the offering as a service to those in the Jerusalem church. Now, this collection was not a small task. Paul’s previous letter to the Corinthians indicates he intended even the churches of Galatia to participate.

Of course, one could understand this passage solely in terms of one’s annual giving to the church, but I think there is something deeper at play here. Paul’s words speak to how one gives his or her life to Christ. Paul is saying something about how you encounter God’s grace. Grace is a gift to share as we respond in our relationship with God. Grace is also what we are called to give back to the larger vision and community of God’s people. We are called to give ourselves toward God’s redemptive work in the world—right here and now.

In the opening verses of this passage, Paul points to the Macedonian churches as an example of generosity. Those in the Macedonian churches have been generous toward the poor believers in Jerusalem. Paul moves on to say he is not commanding anyone *per se*, but he is challenging them to “excel in generosity.” This challenge is placed within the larger narrative context. Paul is not commanding them or scolding them. Paul is, however, narrating the joy found in God’s abundant love. The challenge is an invitation to live in freedom and delight when being generous. It is important to note that the Macedonians were impoverished, while those in Corinth were living in one of the wealthiest cities. They gave despite the adversity they were facing under Roman occupation.

By holding the Macedonian churches as an example, Paul shows us we can learn some things from the Macedonian churches about exceling in the grace of giving.

1. The Macedonian churches’ generosity was a grace from God.

They were rich in generosity, but it was evidence of the Spirit’s renewing work. Their generosity was a reflection of Christ’s love. God’s grace, God’s merciful favor, is expressed in many ways.

The economic theory of God’s people is different than the world’s economic theory. While the world tells us we must buy more to be happy, Paul’s economic theory tells us that everything belongs to God. God has shared with us His own person in Jesus Christ. Even if we have empty bank accounts, we are rich because of God’s grace toward us. You do not need to be wealthy to be generous. Some of the

most generous people I have ever known are far from what our culture would consider wealthy. We do not give to get more; we give because we have received. We love because we have been loved.

The Message translation explains it like this: “The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.”

Those in the Macedonian churches were undergoing some major trials, yet, the trials “exposed their true colors.” (vs. 1-4) Their true colors were those of generosity.

2. The Macedonian churches’ generosity was beyond their ability.

Because they were experiencing persecution, they had limited funds to spare. Even if what they gave was small, it was beyond what others would have expected. People would have understood if they did not give anything. When passing the collection plate, someone easily could have nudged them with his or her elbow and whispered, “That is okay; you do not need to give this week.” Perhaps even Paul, knowing what they are experiencing, did not ask them to give to the collection for those in Jerusalem. They still gave, and they gave beyond their means. Many Christians give based on what they are able to give. Here we see the opposite. Just like the widow in Mark 12 who gave all she could, they gave sacrificially.

Notice that Paul never tells us the amount those in the Macedonian churches gave. Why not? The size of their giving was not what impressed Paul. Paul was not concerned with the amount. Likewise, the amount we give is not the issue. The liberality and generosity we express when we give is what matters. It was the generosity that Paul noticed. Those in the Macedonian churches had their priorities in order. Their focus was not on temporary things. They placed more value on spiritual things than they placed on material things.

In the book, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, Walter Brueggemann writes:

“We who are now the richest nation are today’s main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. [...] we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God’s abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly.

He continues, “The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being.” Brueggemann asserts that we can trust God’s abundance even in the face of scarcity.¹

3. The Macedonian churches’ generosity was freely offered.

Their situation was difficult, but they pleaded to share in the service of the saints in Jerusalem. As far as the Macedonian believers were concerned, it was a privilege to share in the offering. They wanted the opportunity to participate. God was doing something, and they wanted to be a part of what He was doing. What would it look like if we *pleaded* for the opportunity to give toward what God is doing in the world?

Stewardship is not about shaming people into giving, but living a Christ-shaped life. Paul relates his appeal to the heart of Christian faith. As members of the body of Christ, we are to see ourselves as embodying the same love modeled for us in the life and person of Christ. We are called to recognize God is working in the world, and being faithful stewards means we want to join God in His loving work. This is the story of God, but we are called to play a part in the story. To excel in the grace of giving, joy is not focused on the gift itself, but joy is found in participating in God’s mission and God’s love.

Picture a water pitcher. If a water pitcher were only used to hold water, it would not be fulfilling its full purpose. A water pitcher is meant to pour out water. You do not fill a water pitcher without knowing you will also empty it. The point of filling the water pitcher is for the pitcher to be emptied. In the same way, we are filled with the Holy Spirit for the sake of others. We are filled to be emptied; our love should spill out as we love God and love our neighbors.

4. The Macedonian churches’ generosity came out of their commitment to Christ.

This is the root of the Macedonian churches’ generosity. They first gave themselves to God. This is a mark of true discipleship. Their generosity came from their commitment to Christ. As committed believers, they gave themselves to God’s mission. Perhaps a better word is surrender. They surrendered themselves to God.

This should be the mindset of all believers. We must first surrender ourselves to God before we can ever surrender our resources or money. This starts with noticing how God is working; becoming aware of the needs around us allows us to notice how we can join God’s mission.

In describing the community in Acts 2, Dean Flemming notes: “The unity and inclusiveness of God’s people, their mercy and generosity, their worship and joy, all ‘proclaim’ the Spirit’s transforming

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope: Contested Truth in a Post-Christian World*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000), 72.

power. The way Christians live together testifies to the world that the end time reign of God has appeared; that God is visibly present among them.”² There is something magnetic about God’s love as we embody it in the world.

In 2 Corinthians 8:7, Paul writes: “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.*” (The Message)

Let us go in peace as we follow God’s call to excel in the grace of giving.

² Dean Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: a Biblical Perspective On Being, Doing and Telling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 152.