

## Grace-Enabled 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

In recognizing and celebrating the generosity of the Macedonian Churches, the Apostle Paul attributes their liberality to “the grace that God has given” (vs. 1). Grace (*charis*) was both a biblical and secular word that had many expressions, meanings and applications during the New Testament period. For many today, grace is often described as the “free and unmerited favour of God... [in]... relation to the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings.”<sup>1</sup>

In this context however, grace is best understood as an enabling gift from God given to the Macedonians so that they might respond to the needs of others with a spirit of liberality and generosity. The key here is that God is the source of such grace. Matthew Henry, in his *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, captures the essence of this truth:

“He certainly means the charitable gifts of these churches, which are called the grace or gifts of God, either because they were very large, or rather because their charity to the poor saints did proceed from God as the author, and was accompanied with true love to God, which also was manifested this way. The grace of God must be owned as the root and fountain of all the good that is in us, or done by us, at any time; and it is great grace and favour from God, and bestowed on us, if we are made useful to others, and are forward to any good work.”

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_grace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_grace)

Such giving is not the result of human effort, but rather the expression of divine enablement, power and blessing. As we explore this passage, keep in focus what it means to experience grace-enabled giving.

### **Truth Encounter**

#### **I. Grace-Enabled Giving is a Result of God's Work in Us**

The issue here is that this gift of grace comes from God. It was His gift to the Macedonians and it is the same gift that is given to us. He is the source and the giver of grace.

The release of such generosity was the result of giving themselves “first of all to the Lord” (vs. 5). The call to be a follower of Christ has always been a full surrender and consecration of one's life. “Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.’” (Mark 8:34-35, NIV)

There has never been a time when God has asked less of us than our total self. In this context the Macedonians gave themselves first to the Lord. All they had and all they were belonged to Him. The message of holiness is rooted in this same principal. Along the road of our spiritual journey there is a crossroad where we encounter the call to take up our cross and follow Christ. (Matt. 16:24, NIV) In the moment we say yes, God's sanctifying grace enables us to die to self and make a full consecration of our hearts to Him. His work in us through the power of the Holy Spirit is full and complete.

It is a joy and privilege to proclaim the message of full salvation that unashamedly “affirms the possibility of human nature being radically and permanently changed by the grace of God.” (Mark R. Quanstrom, *A Century of Holiness Theology*, 180.) The good news is that in giving ourselves first to the Lord, we find enabling grace and empowerment to live a holy and godly life that far exceeds religious obligation or expectation. It is here the Macedonians experienced “overflowing joy” in the midst of “extreme poverty.” (vs. 2) This was the manifestation of God's presence and work in their midst.

#### **II. Grace-Enabled Giving is God at Work through Us**

God's sanctifying grace working in us is always for the purpose of Him working through us. Giving ourselves to God is only the first step. The next part of the journey engages us in the *missio dei*, God's redemptive mission in the world. It is always for the sake of others, and, like

the Macedonians, they gave what they had for the good of those for whom they had never met. With a spirit of generosity they responded to the needs of others.

In the same fashion we, too, are called to give with joyful liberality as we participate in the call to “make Christlike disciples in the nations.”<sup>2</sup> From the very beginning days of our church there was a clarion call to mission. “We are debtors to every man to give him the gospel in the same measure in which we have received it.” (P.F. Bresee)<sup>3</sup> In the same manner that we have received, so ought we to freely give.

John Wesley left us with a rich spiritual heritage when it comes to grace-enabled giving. In his lifetime he “earned today’s equivalent of \$1.4 million, he lived on 2% of his income and gave 98% of it away. He did. He ‘tithed’ 98%. In fact, during Wesley’s lifetime he earned the equivalent of \$30 million. When he died, [he] left behind only a few miscellaneous coins and a couple of silver spoons. He had given away the rest. He practiced what he preached.”<sup>4</sup>

In our scripture passage we encounter ways that God’s work is manifested through us:

**a) Give Beyond Our Circumstances**

In describing the circumstances of the Macedonians, it would seem at first glance that they had nothing to give. Paul describes their situation as “extreme poverty.” (vs. 2) Most of us have little or no idea of what that really entails.

In his commentary, Albert Barnes observes two components of this poverty. First of all, it was “a fact arising probably from the consideration that the poor generally embraced the gospel first, and also because it is probable that they were molested and stripped of their property in persecutions.” (Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible) Not only did they have little to begin with, but even worse they lost what they did have. Yet, with a joyful heart they gave in a way that exceeded their circumstances.

A retired pastor shared a grace-giving story with me that occurred many years ago. During his ministry in a poor rural area, he served at a church that was struggling to meet its giving goals. Gathering together, he and the board prayed and asked the Lord to provide for their financial obligations. One board member, who herself was destitute, pledged to give two dollars. The pastor told me, “I rebuked her for doing that as she had nothing to give.” She in turn scolded him and said, “Don’t rob me of the blessing to give.”

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<sup>2</sup> Church of the Nazarene mission

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4667204.P\\_F\\_Bresee](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4667204.P_F_Bresee)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.drurywriting.com/keith/wesley.htm>

**b) Give Beyond Our Ability**

Ability speaks about our capacity or our potential. What is it we actually have? In reality, the Macedonians had very little to give. Their resources were meager and sparse. Yet, Paul affirms them in giving what they did have, “as much as they were able.” (vs. 3) In and of itself, this is commendable and praiseworthy. However, they gave “beyond their ability”. (vs. 3) This invokes the grace and power of God in ways that are beyond our understanding. It moves us into the realm of a miracle offering. Giving at this level opens the door to God’s ability to multiply the loaves and the fishes in such a way that there is more than enough left over after every need has been met. God’s presence is able to transform the resources of our ability into his supernatural provision. No wonder their joy was overflowing as they “urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.”(vs. 4)

**c) Give Beyond Our Expectations**

One of the basic components of life and relationship deals with expectation, the “strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future.”<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, expectations can create boundaries, or one may have low expectations. Expectations may be expressed in terms of faith propositions or in terms of limitations. No doubt, Paul did have some level of anticipation of what the people might be able to do in terms of financial support for those in need. However, the report came back they had exceeded his expectations (v.5). What a cause for celebration when as a congregation we not only meet, but exceed our goal! In God’s economy there is always more than enough! J. Hudson Taylor, missionary to China testified to this essential truth: “When God's work is done in God's way for God's glory, it will never lack God's supply.”<sup>6</sup>

**III. Grace-Enabled Giving Bears Witness to Christlike Living**

“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.” (vs. 7)

The journey toward Christlikeness involves faith from beginning to end: the communication of the good news to others with an understanding of God’s redemptive plan. Furthermore there is intentional and earnest obedience to the ways of God manifested in the Christian virtue which is love. Paul, in urging Titus, also speaks to us: in the same way that you

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.google.ca/search?sourceid=navclient&aq=&og=exepctations&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4SUNC\\_enCA366CA366&q=exepctations&gs\\_l=hp...0i10I5.0.0.4.1059151.....0.Luxe8tPmcWc](https://www.google.ca/search?sourceid=navclient&aq=&og=exepctations&ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4SUNC_enCA366CA366&q=exepctations&gs_l=hp...0i10I5.0.0.4.1059151.....0.Luxe8tPmcWc)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/giving.htm>

excel in these qualities, so too excel in this grace of giving. From one flows the other. Grace-enabled giving is always integral to the call to Christlike living, which is the essence of holiness. The impact of our lives is always much more significant than we may know or realize. Our mission is to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19, NIV). As such, when we excel in our giving enabled by grace, we represent a living testimony of God’s unmerited favor to all. This good news is for everyone in all places and at all times. Our Wesleyan heritage joyfully proclaims that all may be saved! May we excel in every area, bearing witness to the one who has ‘saved us and called us to a holy life’ (2 Tim.1:9, NIV).

### **Conclusion**

Throughout our history, the Church of the Nazarene has understood that stewardship is most effective when a spirit of liberality and generosity are present among its people. Grace-enabled giving is not an event, but a lifestyle. The key here is that this is not a human endeavor, but rather a divine enterprise. It is God’s gift of grace that enables us to ‘excel in this gift of giving.’ Let us follow in the footsteps of our Macedonian brothers and sisters!