

Giving as a Way of Life

Scripture Passage: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7, NRSV

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; (2) for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. (3) For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, (4) begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints— (5) and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, (6) so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. (7) Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you[d]—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

Introduction

Our text begins with a clear purpose: "We want you to know".

From the beginning, it's clear there is a specific message to be heard. In a sense, it's as if Paul is saying, "Now listen up!"

He goes on to say that something quite amazing has been happening in the churches of Macedonia. Now remember, Paul was writing this letter to the church that was in Corinth, a major city in Southern Greece. Paul helped to establish this church and had a deep commitment to it. In his first letter to the church in Corinth, which we know as First Corinthians, Paul spent much time writing about how the church ought to deal with certain local and external conflicts: things like sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols. These were matters of the church's image and relationship with the rest of the community. But in Paul's second letter, Second Corinthians, he is much more concerned with what is happening inside the church than with relations to the world outside.

Macedonia was a large region to the north of Greece, where Paul had established three churches: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Borea. It was a historically rich area, with lush forests and river-filled valleys that led into the Balkan Mountains. It was also a major port area, so at times this region was the heart of trade and commerce. But when the Romans took over, many areas of the region became neglected and stricken with poverty. Think of the city of Detroit before and after the 2008 recession in America. It was at one point filled with luxuries, but now, it is filled with abandoned factories. And what about all of those workers? They are left to their own devices: poor, homeless, and searching for jobs. Likewise, in Macedonia they suffered a "severe ordeal of affliction." (vs. 2)

And yet, Paul continues, "Their abundant joy *and* their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity." (vs. 2)

Think about that phrase for just a moment. Their affliction was overwhelming. And yet, so was their joy. Surely some thought that these Macedonians were crazy! How can you ever be joyful amidst times of grief and affliction? When you don't have anything to give how can you be wealthy in generosity? Paul chooses this example of the church in Macedonia because it tells us something fundamental about what it means to truly give.

I had professor in seminary, who was well past the age of retirement, but he kept on teaching because it was a part of him. I remember one day in class when we were looking at a passage in the Old Testament on tithing. One student asked the teacher, "Is this text the reason you believe in tithing?" And without any hesitations, this seasoned professor looked up and said, "What I *believe* in, *is giving* - which includes, but goes well beyond a numerical tithe."

Giving is a *way* of life. What Paul writes to the church in Corinth about is the idea that giving, in the way that the Macedonians did, can be an opportunity for holiness.

John Wesley spoke often about the need for "holiness of heart and of life". It was the idea, rooted in the mission of God, that all people are to seek after a transformation of their hearts, to take on the shape of God's own heart, and so experience the transformation of their very lives. Thus, Wesley often prayed for the Holy Spirit to strengthen the Christian will so as to produce every good desire, whether relating to tempers, words, or actions, or to inward and outward holiness.¹ We have been created in the image of God, created to be holy as God is Holy. If we look inward and recognize what it means to do right out of our heart rather than out of an obligation, then we open ourselves up to a radical transformation toward loving God and loving others.

In holiness, we no longer love, or give, or act mercifully out of fear for the law. Instead, through a holiness of heart and life, our acts of giving become the way that we reflect the mission and the image of God. In our giving, we embody the gospel message. This is what we see in the churches of Macedonia.

The offering that the Macedonians gave to was not a payment for Paul's services as a missionary and apostle. Rather, it was a special offering being raised to help support poor Christians living in Jerusalem. This offering was to help support the church's mission to make Christlike disciples everywhere.

Often when we talk about our global mission or fundraising, we quickly fall into a pattern of just meeting supply and demand. One church will hear about a need somewhere in the world, and they will raise the funds to meet that need. I have no problem against charity. But

¹ John Wesley, Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," §§ 9–10, in Sermons III, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 208.

the gospel calls us to something more. We are to partake in a common mission — to lead people to Christ and to train up disciples across the world and in all nations.²

When we talk about what it means to be the Church, we often point out how the early church, in Acts 2, gave their possessions and money to meet everyone's need. But take note of how quickly this practice spreads. Not only are churches giving within their immediate context and their local community, but also as a way of being *united*, being *one* church. Each congregation is asked to support the needs of *all* congregations.

Whether one church is richer or poorer is irrelevant to the discipline of giving. In Christ, all churches have been made one; we are a part of the same body. And if one part of the body is sick, it will affect the whole.

Daily we hear news of Christians being persecuted across the world: people savagely murdered for their faith and for the work of the Gospel in the world. Their afflictions are *our* afflictions. And, *our* afflictions are *their afflictions*. We are in this together.

In Macedonia communities of Christians in need, living in poverty, were more concerned with the needs of others than the needs of their own. This would be like refugees from Syria giving their time and resources to help orphans in Africa. Or a single mother, working two jobs in Los Angeles, still finding ways to pray for persecuted Christians every night with her children. We are *one* Church, and we are in this together. Giving is way of life, which embodies what the gospel truly means.

You don't receive God's grace because you've earned it or deserve it, like wages from a job. Instead, the grace of God is freely given, like a gift. This is what our giving ought to look like. Why wouldn't anyone want to be involved in this sort of life-giving practice? Yet often, we limit the work of mission to churches that are well off, financially secure, and perhaps even wealthy. As someone living in the United States, you might not feel like you are wealthy, but compared to the much of the world, you are. As churches, we spend a lot of money to travel to far of lands and build wells, schools, and homes. And this *is* good work! But we should also learn how to join in a common mission with the churches that we visit and support. Don't just go to a country, do a building project, and then leave. Rather, partner with the church that you are there to support to find *another* area of need and provide for it *together*.

If we are afraid of asking those less fortunate than ourselves to participate in such work, what does that say about the nature of the work we do? Mission is not just about one party doing deeds for another, but rather, about embodying a way of life that reflects God's work in the world. And again, this is for *all* people.

When we look at the text, it seems that at first Paul didn't ask the churches in Macedonia to participate in this offering. He knew that they were poor, and, likely, in accord with cultural

² Credit should be given to Dr. David Wesley, who has helped to spread the use of the phrase “common mission”. For further study, see his work “A Common Mission” (Wesley, David. *A Common Mission: Healthy Patterns in Congregational Mission Partnerships*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

logic, he thought they wouldn't be interested in giving to others who may be less in need of assistance than themselves. But giving, as a way of holiness, is not hierarchical; it is a way of life. These poor, homeless, out-of-work, and afflicted people of Macedonia begged Paul to allow them to give. They begged to have the opportunity to give. Why? Because giving is a way of life that arises out of true love for God and each other. Paul tells us "they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us." (vs. 5)

The church in Macedonia had already begun to pursue holiness of heart and life, and inevitably, they now wanted to become further involved in the mission of God. It seems as if the churches in Macedonia surprised Paul. Perhaps they even renewed and affirmed his belief in the gospel message.

As Paul concludes this section, he says "Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking." (vs. 7) Notice the similarities between this and the list of spiritual gifts in First Corinthians 12 and 14: faith, speech, and knowledge. And to these, Paul now adds giving. As such, the giving of the Macedonians, as with our giving today, is not do simply to an awareness of the needs of others. Rather, it is seen as a sign of the work of God's grace among us.

What can we learn from the example of these Macedonians? Each of us is called to give according to our own means, but when times are rough and when we may have very little to give financially, let the story of the Macedonians be an example to us all. Even amidst severe affliction, they gave even beyond their means. After all, giving is more than just financial charity, it is a sign of God's abounding grace among us. It is a way of life, born out of holiness, that helps us enable the mission of making Christlike disciples in all nations.

So brothers and sisters, in the spirit of the apostle Paul, may you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in your giving. May these continue to be a means of grace to you and to the world, and through these gifts, may all honor, and glory, and power, be ascribed to God, both now and forever. Amen.