

SERMON CCI 2 Corinthians 8: 1-7 The Grace of Giving

The pastor stood before the congregation and said "I have bad news, I have good news, and I have more bad news." The congregation got quiet. "The bad news is: the church needs a new roof!" the pastor said. The congregation groaned. "The good news is: we have enough money for the new roof." A sigh of relief went through the congregation. "The bad news is: it's still in your pockets and purses."

It's scary news when the pastor starts a sermon on giving. Did anyone slump down in your chair as the scripture was read? "Oh no, not a sermon on giving!" Some people get nervous that they'll be expected to give more money. And we all know you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip. Others get angry because they think faith has nothing to do with money, even though Jesus talked about money regularly, and we've all heard of people who say, "All churches care about is getting my money!" Besides, everyone is asking for our money. Think of all the donation requests you get in the mail and see on TV. We can only give to so many good causes. So, if you're nervous, I'm a bit nervous too preaching my first sermon on the grace of giving.

But we don't see any nervousness in Paul as he wrote about the grace of giving. Oh no. Paul was excited about what he had seen God doing in the churches in Macedonia. And Paul had made a promise to the Jerusalem church leaders when he asked for their blessing on his ministry to the Gentiles; he promised to "remember the poor." Jewish people from all over the world came to Jerusalem to observe Jewish holidays, and as a key city, it attracted the poor who came for help. Like large cities today attract the homeless; that's where the resources are. The Roman authorities cut off any assistance to anyone who associated with the Jerusalem church, so Christians were affected too. So Paul was excited to keep his promise by collecting an offering among the Gentile churches to help meet the need.

Paul had sent men from Gentile church to church to receive their offerings and the Macedonian Christians had been particularly generous. And now he was writing to the church in Corinth to complete the offering they began before they got sidetracked by their church squabbles. Money wasn't stopping them; church conflict was. It was time for Corinth to do their part. The poor Macedonians were doing their part even though they had no wealth. And their lives were not much easier than the lives of those in Jerusalem. Listen to what Paul wrote about them, "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty

welled up in rich generosity.” Severe trials, and extreme poverty. That doesn’t sound like wealthy people to me. And yet, in spite of being dirt poor, they gave with rich generosity.

Most of us would say to a person without much money, “Don’t worry about giving. Save your money. You can always give later when you have more.” Didn’t I say something similar a couple Sundays ago before the offering? “This offering is for members, so if you’re a visitor, feel free to let the offering plate pass you by.” I didn’t want visitors to feel pressured to give. But Paul had no concerns like that. Most of us hold onto our money in hard times. Not the Macedonians. They said, “We’d better give it away now before it’s all gone and we **can’t** give.” They gave with a rich generosity that Paul called the evidence of God’s grace among them.

When you think about it, grace stands at the bottom of all that we do as Christians. *We love him because he first loved us. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son (John 3:16).* A couple weeks ago we heard “By grace we are saved through faith.” And we are told to forgive others because God forgave us. God always makes the first move. As Christians, we give as an act of grace because we have received such grace from the Lord.

It was true for the Macedonian Christians. They understood that giving has nothing to do with how much or how little money you have. It’s not about how many bills you owe. It’s not about responding to the appeal or cause that pulls your heart strings the hardest. Or responding out of guilt or pressure. You may give, but there is little joy in it. Christian giving is about a heart set free and so filled with joy that giving is a blessing, not a burden. Giving is not about money at all.

Notice that they had “overflowing joy.” They knew deep inside that they belonged to God, were loved by God, could trust God, and they gave with joy, and God blessed them for it.

Paul wrote of a “severe trial” that had come to the Macedonians—perhaps a wave of persecution from unbelievers. But that did not hinder them. Since their giving was not dependent on good circumstances, it was not deterred by bad circumstances. They gave because their hearts were fully committed to Christ. Most of us tend to give from our surplus. If we have some left over at the end of the week or the beginning of the month, we give. But when we have a deficit, and especially if the church has a surplus, we may not give. The Macedonians gave from their deficit—and they did so with overflowing joy. It’s an entirely different way of looking at giving- giving as a privilege of grace.

Look at what Paul says next: “They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability” (v. 3).” The Macedonians, though they were desperately poor, gave as much as they could, and then they gave some more. That is, they gave more than they “should have given.” No doubt, some people thought they were not prudent or careful in their giving. They gave and gave. This kind of giving can only happen when the heart is set free from a love of money and a fear of not having enough.

But it gets even better. The Macedonians begged Paul for an opportunity to give. I imagine Paul or another leader had taken a look at their poverty and crisis, and thought about not asking them to join the offering from the Gentile churches. After all, **they** could have used such an offering! But they pleaded to be given the privilege of joining the offering for those suffering in Jerusalem. When does this ever happen? No one has ever said to me, “Pastor Barb, let’s take an extra offering today. I’ve got more money I want to give.” The people begged Paul to let them give. When the heart is set free by grace, we want to give.

I experienced this in a small Presbyterian church in a small village in Kenya. The village is so poor there is no electricity and many homes have no running water. Education is low because parents have no money to pay the tuition for their kids to go to public school. Yet, when the villagers came to worship on that Sunday, they were filled with joy and they gave their offerings with joy. In fact, they wanted to give so much, that they had a way for people who had nothing to give to still be able to give. Each Sunday, after the regular offering is received, there is an offering auction. People can bring food from their gardens or small animals like chickens to be auctioned off, and the money that is raised goes into the offering as the poor person’s offering. The Sunday I was there, bananas were auctioned. The heart set free by God’s amazing grace brings a joyful desire to give even when they have nothing to give.

Paul developed this further in II Corinthians 9:7 when he wrote, “Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” God leaves it up to us how much we give because giving is not a money issue; it’s a heart issue. And the motive of our heart matters to God. Why we give makes a difference. For instance, you have a unique situation here with the endowment funds from the sale of the church building. The endowment is a blessing because you know that without it, you could not afford to continue. But those funds can also be a detriment to giving. After all, if there is plenty of money without your giving, why give if the bills are

being paid? When that happens, the endowment funds become a deterrent to faith. Oh, the bills get paid, the staff get paid, the Union Gospel Mission and Tent City 4 receive our donations, we send some to missions, and Issaquah kids get backpacks. But joyful giving does so much more: joyful giving honors God because it is a way of saying, “Lord, we love you so much that we want to give to support those things that matter most to you.”

Here we come to the heart of the matter. “They gave themselves **first** to the Lord.” That means they did not give out of guilt or habit or in response to pressure or manipulation. They gave because they wanted to. And they wanted to because they had already given their lives over to God in gratitude for his grace and wanted to follow wherever God leads. Notice that Paul did not tell the Corinthians to give a certain amount. He knew that if their hearts were right, the amount they gave would be right. Because giving is not a money issue; it’s a heart issue. So, friends, I’m not going to ask you to consider giving a certain amount, so relax. I’m going to ask you a harder question, “Have you given your whole life over to the Lord? Is your heart where it needs to be? Are you living your life as a joyful “thank you” to God because you’ve experienced God’s awesome grace in your life, your sins forgiven, a new meaningful life in Christ, the fellowship of other believers to walk this life with, your every need supplied by grace, a God who hears your prayers, God’s Word to guide your life, and a home in heaven after this life? What amazing grace! Where’s your heart? Because that’s where the grace of giving begins- in a heart made joyful by God’s grace.