

True Generosity

2Corinthians 8:1-15

The year I started Bible College I had almost no money to speak of.

I saved as much as I could from my summer job and managed to have just enough to pay for my first semester of tuition and books with precious little to pay for rent and food.

My first priority was getting a job and thankfully I was able to quickly get one.

It was at a machine refurbishing shop and my job was to clean, polish, and paint old machines to make them look as new as possible.

I worked as many hours as I could and thankfully my employer allowed me to work around my school so I was doing all I could to make enough money to pay rent, eat, and save for my next semester.

After a few months, as semester one was coming to an end, it became pretty clear that I wasn't going to make it.

It wasn't long after I had made that realization that it happened.

I went to my mailbox on campus and inside was a letter addressed to me.

It was from an elderly woman in my home church who barely knew me.

She had written a kind letter of encouragement and also a cheque to help cover my expenses.

I was blown away by her generosity.

Because of that I had enough to carry on to semester two.

I kept working and studying and every now and again she would send a letter and a cheque and every time it made the difference for me to keep going another semester.

I learned from others over the years that she had helped far more bible college students than me.

I got to know her a bit when I was home in the summer months and it was obvious that she had sent those cheques out of her love for the LORD.

I got to see in her life first hand one of the hallmarks of being born again and that is true generosity.

It is a quality I have had the privilege to witness on several occasions in my time as pastor of this church.

Many of you have met the needs of strangers, taken care of needs without drawing attention to yourself, given of your time, and sacrificed for the good of others.

Because of that I believe that many of you will be encouraged by what our text has to say to us as we hear from the LORD on the subject of generosity.

[It is a subject that is important for us to hear about especially as we live in a society with so much material wealth, a society that has become very self-centered and self-serving. Turn in your bibles

again to the book of **2Corinthians 8:1-15**. In these verses the Apostle Paul is talking to the Corinthian believers about contributing to the needs of believers in the church at Jerusalem. Giving money to help people in need is something non-Christians can do, but there is more to true generosity than simply meeting someone's physical needs. This text shows us some of what that looks like. From what is written here we can learn at least three valuable lessons about true generosity. First, we learn that...]

Point #1 – True generosity happens according to God's grace. (Verses 1-5)

Giving to those in need is at its best when it is coming from a heart transformed and moved by the Holy Spirit.

Verse one opens with these words, it says, "We want you to **know** brothers..."

That word *brothers* is an important word.

Even though there had been trouble between Paul and the Corinthians, by the grace of God he still considered them genuine believers, he still considered them to be part of the family of God, and wanted to care for them as such.

Because all that is true, he wants these believers to know something. (**Verse 1**).

He wants them to know about God's grace at work among the Macedonian churches.

It is good to remind ourselves regularly of what the word grace means.

Grace happens when something good is given to someone who doesn't deserve it.

I believe the Bible very clearly teaches us that everything good that comes from God to people is by grace.

No human being deserves anything good from God and therefore everything good in our lives comes by grace.

So as we read these next verses here we have to keep in the front of our minds that this is God doing things in the world for the good of people.

That is something the Corinthians need to hear about and it is something that we need to hear about too.

If I am reading this correctly that we should hear this as God's grace given to and through the Macedonian churches.

Paul begins giving us the evidence of God's grace at work in **verses 2-3**.

Some might read this and think, "How is this God's grace to the Macedonians, it sounds like they were suffering rather than being blessed?"

Where is the grace? That is a good question and to see the answer we need to understand that this is not about the money or the ease of their situation.

This is about what is happening in the hearts of these believers.

How is it possible that they have “joy” in “a severe test of affliction”?

How is it that they were experiencing “extreme poverty” and they still wanted to give to the need?

Notice the end of verse 3 here. They gave “of their own accord”. There is no manipulation or force being applied here, they want to do it all on their own.

That is emphasized in **verses 4-5**.

That is amazing. It isn't the apostle and his fellow gospel workers that are trying to persuade the Macedonians, but it is the other way around.

These believers were “begging...earnestly for the favour of taking part.”

The word favour there is the same Greek word that is translated grace.

They believed this was all from God and deeply wanted to be part of His grace at work in the world.

Where did that desire come from?

It is a desire that seems totally contrary to our nature as human beings.

When things are tough and resources are scarce the natural response is to pull back, but these believers decide to do the exact opposite and contribute to the need.

Why does that happen? It happens because the Holy Spirit is at work in these people, giving them a deep concern for other believers who they haven't even met.

The Holy Spirit opens their hearts to what it means to have Christ as their greatest treasure.

With Jesus as their greatest treasure they do what they can to meet the physical needs of believers in Jerusalem.

All of it is from God and by His grace.

[On occasion I have mentioned a man by the name of George Mueller. He was an evangelist who lived in the 1800's and is most famous for running an orphanage in Bristol England. Sometimes the orphanage would run out of basic necessities like food. When that happened he still gathered the children at the table and gave thanks for the meal they were about to partake in. When the prayer had ended the doorbell would ring and there was a baker at the door and he would say that the Lord impressed on him in the middle of the night to bake and deliver bread to the orphanage. More than once two or three people would show up on the same morning with similar stories. That is amazing, God was answering the prayer of thanksgiving for food that they did not have yet before the prayer was even prayed.]

That is amazing and it happens by the grace of God.

It is so important to see that because if we miss it then we make true generosity impossible.

It is very easy to try and manipulate people into giving money, especially towards something that is good.

That, however, doesn't produce anything good in the heart of the giver.

You see it is possible to be generous out of sinful desires.

We can give out of self-righteousness.

We can give only because we want a tax receipt.

We can give to gain power over others.

We can give with the expectation of getting something in return.

We can give out of guilt, but if those things are driving us then we know nothing of true generosity.

[The only way to be truly generous is to make generosity an act of worship. Giving ourselves first to the LORD out of love for Him and a desire to see Him glorified in the world. Those right motivations come from the work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer. It comes by grace. Here is a second lesson concerning true generosity...]

Point #2 – True generosity begins in the heart and leads to action. (Verses 6-9)

Feeling compassion and making a commitment to help is good, but in order to mean something in a tangible sense commitment needs action.

Verse 6 here gives us some important context for what is being asked of the Corinthian believers.

The need that the Macedonians gave to is something the Corinthians already knew about.

Down in verse 10 we will see that they started at the work a year before receiving this letter from Paul.

That is important because it shows that the mention of the true generosity of the Macedonian believers is about reminding the Corinthians about the grace of God at work in them.

They had felt the same stir in their heart to care for the needs of their fellow believers and had expressed a desire to help.

So the mention of God's grace at work in other churches is not to say, "They are better than you so you better fall off your wallets and give more to keep up with them."

It is to remind them that they had once felt a similar way.

In verse 7 he goes on to give a list of things that has come to these believers by grace. (Verse 7).

Knowing the context of both 1 and 2 Corinthians, this might seem like a strange thing to say.

There have been many problems and a fair bit of moral failing within this church.

If we read the things in this verse as being accomplished by the Corinthians on their own, then it is a confusing statement.

But if we see the truth that the excelling in faith, speech, knowledge, and earnestness is the abundance of God's grace being given to these believers then all of the sudden it makes sense.

For all their shortcomings and failures, it is still clear to the apostle that the LORD is doing a glorious work of salvation in the city of Corinth.

Part of that work is the display of true generosity and Paul is encouraging these believers to desire that work of grace to continue in their lives.

That is why he writes this in **verse 8**.

He knows full well that this cannot be a command, because if they only participate because they are forced to or because they feel guilty then it will not be true generosity.

That said he also wants them to see that their initial commitment needs to be followed through in order to be proved genuine.

Verse 9 shows that point in the clearest way possible. (**Verse 9**).

According to 1Peter 1:20 God had chosen before the foundation of the world to send Jesus into the world to save His people from sin.

We find throughout the Old Testament Scriptures God's promise of sending a redeemer.

We also know that God's purpose in doing so was to display His glory in His infinite love and perfect justice.

That display required more than the promise, more than the commitment, it required the actual act of God the Son becoming the Son of man.

Paul describes the incarnation here as Jesus possessing riches and yet becoming poor.

We have to appreciate that he is describing what is beyond our understanding.

He is not meaning at all that the LORD's divine nature became less or changed in any way.

He is meaning that His infinite glory became veiled or hidden in His human flesh so that as He lived upon the earth most people did not give Him the honour and praise He richly deserved which never ceases when His glory is displayed in heaven.

So the picture here is that Jesus used the riches of His nature to make His people rich.

By living a perfect life in true humility, by dying in our place, by rising again, He makes everyone who trust in Him right with God and therefore can justly give the gift of eternal life to all who believe.

He did more than make a promise, He followed through with real action to meet the needs of desperate people because that is what true generosity does.

[Think of it like flying an airplane. When a pilot takes an airplane off the ground he/she is committed to landing the plane. In order for that to work out well for everyone on the airplane the

pilot has to follow through on the commitment to do everything necessary to landing the plane. Failing to do that hurts rather than helps everyone involved.]

It is the natural progression of God's grace at work in the believer to produce generosity.

That is more than feeling bad for people.

That is more than offering lip service to a situation.

That is more than just saying we are going to do something.

It is following through.

[This in one of the ways we call attention to the glory of Jesus in the world. Now that brings up an important concern. If we commit ourselves to this kind of generosity will we end up in the poor house ourselves? It is likely that at least some people in the Corinthian church were concerned about that and so Paul addresses that concern in verses 10-15. God's word shows us here that instead of causing us loss...]

Point #3 – True generosity benefits the believer. (Verses 10-15)

When believers act for God's glory and the good of others they always gain in the kingdom of heaven.

This point is clearly stated in verse 10.

Following through on your commitment to give will be for your good.

It would be very easy to use this verse and others like it to try and take advantage of people in something of a Ponzi scheme using Christian language.

[In a Ponzi scheme the con artist promises his investors a high rate of return. You give me ten dollars and you will get back twenty. As long as the con artist is getting new investors he is able to pay those returns which in turn gets him larger investments from the early adopters and also new investors. This goes on until some people start asking to cash out and the con artist starts running out of new investors and then it all crashes and a whole bunch of people lose all their money.]

That is very similar to what some people try and do in the church.

You give ten dollars to my ministry or to my church and God will give you one hundred.

They take the truth that God has infinite resources and that He can bless people and they twist it into a money making scheme.

Sadly many people buy into that kind of thinking.

Many will even testify that it works.

It can easily lead to ruin because people become motivated by a love for money rather than a love for God.

They think themselves spiritual but are in reality worldly.

While the Lord does choose to give riches to some people in this life, He does not promise.

In fact there are probably more warnings about riches and the love of money in the bible than examples of God giving wealth to people.

The kind of generosity being encouraged here is not about increasing one's assets.

Listen to what is said in **verses 11-12.**

There is no promise here of give and get more.

This is an encouragement to give to believers in need out of what the LORD has already given to them.

God does not judge the quality of our generosity by the amount given.

Earlier in the text the Macedonian believers are commended because they gave out of their poverty, but nothing is said about how much they gave.

What they are commended for is their attitude in giving not the amount.

[Jesus taught that lesson clearly to his disciples when on one occasion they were watching people put money in the temple collection boxes. Wealthy people came with big donations and then a poor widow puts in the smallest amount and Jesus says, "She gave more than all of them."]

God does not care about how much we have, He cares about our attitude towards what we have.

It is very easy to become a worshipper of things, but true generosity shows that we understand that material things are a means by which we can worship God.

Commenting on this verse Murray Harris writes, "Material wealth can obscure spiritual poverty."

It is easy to have lots of stuff and be godless.

Generosity is a powerful antidote to the dangers of materialism.

In **verses 13-14** we can see that the goal of the apostle is bigger than raising money.

The goal here is not to make the Corinthians destitute and the believers in Jerusalem rich.

The goal is to care for the needs of as many people in the body of Christ as possible.

In verse 14 it speaks of abundance and need.

It may be that Paul has more than material things on his mind.

It may be that he is thinking of spiritual things as well.

The Corinthian church has material wealth, but the Jerusalem church may be seen as having more spiritual wealth.

Which is of more value?

The point here is that believers would care for one another to the glory of God and their mutual benefit.

The point is driven home in **verse 15.**

[This is a reference to the people of Israel in the desert and God providing for their daily needs through something called manna. Every morning the manna appeared and they were to gather a certain amount for each person in a household. There were not to gather more than the amount they were told and they were not supposed to keep any overnight. If they followed the instructions from the LORD then everyone had enough to meet their needs.]

The lesson there is clear. God is the one who provides for the needs of His people.

If you give out of true generosity to believers in need the Lord is going to care for you even as He is using you to care for others that belong to Him.

You see, it turns giving into worship and if it is an act of worship then it is an act of true generosity.

It is all according to His grace at work in His people.

That grace is on display for the world to see because it leads to action.

The action of true generosity always ends up to our benefit because we grow in our trust in the Lord and our hope in the gospel.

We have as Jesus says, “Treasure in heaven” and that is for our eternal good.

I once heard someone say of the wealth in our society that we live under the “tyranny of things”.

As Christians we can find freedom from that tyranny.

Money and things don't have to control us if by the grace of God we learn to use our things for worship.

May we know that kind of freedom as God by His grace enables us to show true generosity towards His people for His glory.