

A Ministry of Grace: A Theology of Generosity (Part 1)

2 Corinthians 8:1–15

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Pastor Trent Eastman — New Baptist Church, Huntington, WV

Introduction: The Background to the Collection

To understand what Paul is doing in 2 Corinthians 8, we need to go back to the book of Acts and the plight of the church in Jerusalem.

Acts begins with the birth of the Church — Jesus’ ascension into heaven, and then, ten days later, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all the disciples gathered in that upper room, both men and women, and the church growing by three thousand people on that first day of Pentecost. And after that first day, month after month the church grew. Believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles, and all who believed were together and had all things in common (Acts 2:42–44). Clearly, the hand of God was upon them.

But that growth alarmed the Jewish religious authorities, and their alarm quickly became aggression. First they pulled Peter and John in for questioning, threatened them, and told them to stop. They didn’t stop. They kept right on preaching and teaching, and their numbers continued to grow. Next, the high priest had all the apostles arrested and put in prison — only to find them preaching at the temple the very next morning. He had them arrested again, beaten this time, and warned them not to speak in the name of Jesus. They did not stop. Within those first six months, the church had grown from the original 120 people to around 15,000. And it was around this time that the religious authorities’ panic turned violent. The deacon Stephen was stoned to death, and “there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1). The Jerusalem church was scattered. We should not underestimate the extent of that suffering. There was physical violence. Believers became social outcasts, forbidden from buying or selling in the market — spat upon, reproached, driven from their homes.

And then, to make matters worse, about a decade after the resurrection, a devastating famine swept through Jerusalem and the wider Roman world — an event documented by both Roman historians and Josephus. The church in Jerusalem was in desperate straits. In response, the mostly Gentile church of Antioch sent a short-term relief mission through Paul and Barnabas

(Acts 11:30; 12:25). But that was only a bandage. The need persisted, and so as Paul carried the gospel to the Greek and Roman cities, he also told those churches about their suffering brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The churches of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth all wanted to help.

And help they did. As Paul had instructed, they collected money on the first day of every week and set it aside until it was time to send it to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1–3; Romans 15:25–26). That time had now come. Paul and his traveling companions had gathered the offerings from the churches of Macedonia, and now, in his letter to Corinth, he turns to address their collection — and there is a specific reason why he must.

Paul and the church in Corinth had been in serious conflict. That conflict had been resolved; they were reconciled. But during the period of conflict, it appears the church had stopped collecting the relief funds. Our passage today is Paul motivating them to finish what they had promised.

This passage matters to us well beyond its historical occasion, because it contains a full theology of generosity. The section runs all the way from 2 Corinthians 8:1 through 9:15. The first half — what we will look at today — is about the *why*: why be generous. The second half takes up the consequences of generosity for both giver and recipient, and we will come to that next week.

So then: why give? Why be generous? Paul gives four reasons in today's passage, and woven among them is a rich theology of generosity.

1. Authentic Discipleship Has Financial Consequences (vv. 1–5)

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia. (v. 1)

Before moving on, notice what Paul calls their financial collection: he calls it “the grace of God.” He will do this — refer to this monetary gift as grace (χάρις) — seven times across this passage. This verse is not a one-off remark; it is an anchor for his entire theology of generosity. He calls this financial collection *grace* because it is an outflow of Christ's grace. We will examine that connection more closely at verse 9, but it is important to see it here from the outset: Paul is redefining what an offering is. It is not a transaction — money passing from one person to another. It is grace taking visible, tangible, economic form in the world. When you help someone in need, that help is grace made visible.

The second thing to note in this opening verse is what Paul is *not* doing. He is not holding the Macedonians up as a fundraising benchmark and saying, “Look at all the money they gave —

you need to be more like them.” He is not doing that. What he is doing is showing the Corinthians what discipleship looks like. Verses 2 through 5 make this clear:

For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints — and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. (vv. 2–5)

This is not a fundraising success story. It is a discipleship success story that had financial consequences. What did the Macedonians give first? Verse 5 tells us: they gave themselves first to the Lord. It was out of that surrender that financial generosity flowed. And the sequence matters enormously. Surrender of self to the Lord precedes and produces surrender of resources. And one of the reasons that surrender of self must come first is that it is the source of the joy that produces abundance out of poverty.

Consider Paul’s math in verse 2: a severe test of affliction — persecution, famine, crushing taxation — *plus* an abundance of joy, *plus* extreme poverty, equals an overflow of generosity. That is extraordinary arithmetic, and it is only possible when the heart is first surrendered to the Lord.

This matters because a heart that has not been surrendered to the Lord, and is not experiencing that abundance of joy, tends to suffer from what we might call a poverty mentality. A poverty mentality has nothing to do with the size of a bank account, large or small. It is a materialistic view of the world in which there is never enough, and so everything must be held onto and hoarded. In a poverty mentality, what one possesses defines who one is — possessions become identity — and because identity and security are rooted in material things, other people are viewed and measured through that same lens, producing envy, comparison, resentment, or contempt. To a poverty-minded person, generosity is not an investment in another person or grace becoming visible; it is simply a loss. And so the grip on things grows tighter and tighter.

But when a heart is surrendered to the Lord, over time that poverty mentality gives way to something else — a joyful orientation in which security and identity are rooted not in things but in the person and work of Christ. “The joy of the Lord is my strength,” and that joy turns whatever little one may have into an abundance of grace for another.

If you have ever traveled to a place of material poverty — Haiti, parts of Africa, Lebanon — you have likely come back with stories of grace given to you by people who had almost nothing materially but who overflowed with joy. You have seen Paul’s math with your own eyes.

So the first reason to be generous: *authentic discipleship has financial consequences*. Generosity is the product of a heart surrendered to the Lord, leading to an abundance of joy.

2. It Is What Love Does (vv. 6–8)

Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you — see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. (vv. 6–8)

In 1 Corinthians, we learn that the church at Corinth was proud of its spiritual gifts, its eloquence, and its knowledge. Much of that earlier letter is Paul correcting the distortions that pride had produced — factions, competitions, spiritual one-upmanship. But here in verse 7, Paul affirms them. *You excel in faith. You excel in speech. You excel in knowledge*. He agrees with them across the board on everything they had claimed for themselves. And then he pivots: *See that you excel in this act of grace also*. May you excel in grace.

I love that. He uses their own desire for excellence as the argument. You want to be the church that excels? Then excel here — in the place where excellence costs something. Excel in grace.

And the only way to excel in grace is through an abundance of joy, not through a command. This is why he says in verse 8, *I say this not as a command*. He will not order them to give. A commanded gift is not grace. A coerced offering is a transaction. What Paul is after is something that can only exist if it is freely chosen — a gift that is the genuine expression of love rather than reluctant obligation. As evidence of that love, he points again to the Macedonians: Christians there gave beyond their means, beyond anything Paul had asked. That is what love does.

3. Christ Himself Is the Example (v. 9)

Verse 9 is the theological center of the entire passage:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (v. 9)

What were the riches of Christ? His eternal glory with the Father. The worship of every created thing. The fullness of divine life — unbroken, undiminished, without lack of any kind. He was rich in ways that make every earthly fortune look like dust.

But for your sake, he became poor.

The poverty of Christ that Paul describes in Philippians 2 is not merely a reduction of circumstances; it is a descent. He took on flesh. He entered a world of hunger and thirst, of weariness and homelessness. He was misunderstood, rejected, and finally betrayed. He was stripped of his garments and nailed to a Roman cross, and in that moment he bore the full weight of divine abandonment — *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* He died, and was placed in a tomb. That is the poverty of Christ. That is the bottom of the descent.

And yet. Because of that poverty, those who are in him have become rich. What are those riches? Justification — the guilt is gone. Adoption — you are a child of God. The indwelling Spirit — God himself lives in you. Peace with God — the war is over. The hope of glory — there is an inheritance that cannot be taken.

This is what Christ has done for us: he lived a cross-shaped life that made us rich. And so we, as his followers, are called to love and live in the same way — surrendered, cross-shaped lives of love that make others rich. This is what transforms a charitable transaction into grace made tangible.

4. Be Faithful to Your Promises (vv. 10–11)

And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. (vv. 10–11)

In other words: be faithful to what you have promised.

A year before this letter, the Corinthians had made a commitment. According to 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, they had begun collecting funds to be sent to Jerusalem. This was something they *wanted* to do; they agreed to it freely. Then the conflict came. The false apostles arrived. The relationship between Paul and Corinth fractured. And the collection — this act of grace — stopped. Not out of malice, perhaps, but out of the disorder that falls on a church in conflict.

Now they are reconciled. And Paul is saying: finish what you started. Notice carefully how he frames this. He does not say *you owe this* or *you are obligated*. He says *this benefits you*. He is being a pastor. When we fail to honor what we have committed to God, something happens

inside us — a half-kept promise sits in the conscience and becomes a kind of dead weight. Paul is not threatening them. He is telling them the truth: finishing this is good for you. Keeping your word is how integrity is formed.

Two Pastoral Boundaries

Before closing this section, Paul does something I find profoundly pastoral. He has given four powerful reasons to be generous, and now he draws two careful boundaries around their giving — boundaries designed not to limit grace, but to protect the giver.

The first boundary: give from what you have, not from what you don't have.

For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. (v. 12)

Notice what Paul says God is looking at: not the size of the gift, but the readiness of the heart. God is far more pleased with a person who gives a little with a willing and ready spirit than with a person of great means who gives reluctantly. Paul is protecting the person of modest resources from being pressured to give what they do not have, and from feeling that their small gift doesn't count. Give according to the readiness of your heart, and according to what you actually have.

The second boundary: generosity shares the burden, but it does not transfer it.

For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. (vv. 13–14)

When Paul speaks of fairness here, he is not describing socialism. We know this because socialism is not voluntary, and throughout this entire passage Paul has stressed the completely voluntary nature of their generosity. This ministry of grace ceases to be a ministry of grace the moment giving is coerced. Readiness of heart only exists in an atmosphere of freedom.

What Paul is describing is something more like the different seasons that people move through over the course of a life. There are seasons when you are the one with abundance — when you are positioned to let your resources flow toward another's need. And there are other seasons when you are the one in need, when you are the recipient of grace. We all move through these seasons, and that is exactly how it is supposed to be. The goal is not to transfer Jerusalem's

suffering to Corinth, but to share in both the suffering and the provision that God supplies. Paul makes this point by reaching back to Exodus 16:

“Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.” (v. 15)

This is the passage about manna — the bread from heaven God provided daily for Israel in the wilderness. People gathered what they needed, with one rule: it could not be hoarded. Paul’s quotation from Exodus 16:18 describes how God provided for everyone in the wilderness, those with much and those with little alike, and the provision was always exactly enough. What Paul is saying is that the provision God has given to the church in Corinth is like the manna God gave to the Israelites.

The Church is like Israel in the wilderness — living on the daily manna of God. And that provision is meant to circulate, flowing from abundance toward need until no one is without. That circulation *is* grace moving through the church. When hands open instead of close, when surplus flows toward need, when promises made to God are kept and hearts are surrendered — something happens that the world has no category for. Grace becomes visible. This is the ministry of grace Paul is asking the church at Corinth to participate in, and as God’s word, it is what he is asking us to participate in too.

A Father’s Day Postscript

I want to close by returning to something I mentioned at the beginning: this is Father’s Day, and while this is not a Father’s Day passage, there is a message for fathers in it — not in what Paul says, but in *how* he says it, in the way he, as a spiritual father, cares for the church.

Did you spot it?

He encouraged without commanding. Paul had the authority. He was an apostle. He could have ordered them. He did not. He invited. He held up an example. He made the case. And then he left the response to them. Fathers, that is the long and humbling work of raising children toward maturity. You have the authority. The question is whether you will use it to control or to form. A father who only commands produces either rebels or robots. A father who urges, who invites, who makes the case for what is good and true and then trusts his children to respond — that father is watering the seed of faith.

He protected without controlling. The boundaries Paul draws in this passage are worth pausing over. Give from what you have, not from what you don’t have. Do not give to the point of your own ruin. Paul was guarding them — caring more about the giver than the gift. Fathers, your children need to know that you are *for them*, not just for what they can produce or

perform or become. The father who is always pushing, always demanding more, always measuring — that father produces exhausted children who never feel like enough. But the father who says, “I see what you have, and what you have is enough” — that father produces children who are free. Free to give. Free to grow. Free to become.

He pointed beyond himself to Christ. Everything Paul urged them toward, he grounded in Christ — not in Paul’s own example, not in Paul’s personal need, but in Christ, who became poor so that we might become rich. The best thing a father can do — the single most important thing — is to make sure that when his children look up, they do not stop at him. That they see, past him and through him, the Father in heaven who gave his Son, who became poor for their sake, who has made them rich beyond anything this world can offer. And fathers, the very best way to point to Christ is through your own life surrendered to him. Let them see Jesus in you.