

The Challenge of Giving 2

2 Cor 8:1-15

Last time we looked at 2 Corinthians was at harvest and I found this evening's passage challenging on a day where we were challenged about giving. From our brief review of the passage, we saw that Paul was challenging them about giving and we found that our giving should be motivated, firstly by God's grace and secondly according to our means.

We give because God has shown grace to us: *9 You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; rich as he was, he made himself poor for your sake, in order to make you rich by means of his poverty.* We give and we give graciously because of the grace already shown to us. He has shown us His grace in Jesus dying for us, in loving us, in offering us forgiveness, in the care he shows us day by day, in the material benefits of life we have.

Then we saw the most interesting point, that Paul never asked or expected them to give beyond their means even though they gave more. That was reiterated later in the chapter too: *12 If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you haven't.*

Why? Because their giving was according to God's grace – it was their love response to Him. It's a basic NT principle and as we explore more about giving in this chapter tonight and then from chapter 9 we need to understand that God's grace underpins it.

I say this because in many circles a much more doctrinaire approach to giving has gained much currency in other churches and that's tithing. Tithing is a great guideline, but in the OT it specifically applied to crops and the temple system. We see from both the words of Jesus and the words of Paul here, that people should give according to grace and to means. That's how it works.

The other thing that isn't apparent in the NT is money collected for the church to function, only relief for suffering churches in another place – in this case Judea. Why? Because churches were home based and informal. There were no such things as trust deeds, church buildings, double-entry accounts. We know from this letter and others that there were individuals to support ("paid clergy!!") Where needs arose, whether at home or abroad, the church remembered God's grace and acted with grace and according to their means. So rather than being doctrinaire about giving Paul does the opposite: *8 I am not laying down any rules. But by showing how eager others are to help, I am trying to find out how real your own love is.*

What can we learn as we look at the rest of chapter 8 this evening? First of all Paul was peaking to them on the basis of how he finished chapter 7. After some tough chapters, Paul recognised their love and faithfulness for his ministry and expressed his confidence in them. *2 Cor 7:16 How happy I am that I can depend on you completely!*

So what Paul then takes up in chapter 8 is that dependency by challenging them to give as generously as the Macedonians. He does that on the basis is that in the previous year they had been leaders in generosity: *10 My opinion is that it is better for you to finish now what you began last year. You were the first, not only to act, but also to be willing to act. 11 On with it, then, and finish the job! Be as eager to finish it as you were to plan it, and do it with what you now have.*

It leads us to consider another aspect of giving and that is that a commitment to financially support should be just that. Supporting the Judeans wasn't just a one-off. The problems that had arisen there were ongoing and if they took on a responsibility to support, it should also be a responsibility to see the project through. For both churches and Christian missions, I don't really have to mention that finance is something ongoing, and the most valuable way of helping is invariably to give on a regular basis. And here it is: 2000 years ago the same issue. The issue of means is still the same on regular giving as on one-off: *12 If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you haven't.*

There is another basis of giving that relates to the issue of means and that is the principle of equality: *13-14 I am not trying to relieve others by putting a burden on you; but since you have plenty at this time, it is only fair that you should help those who are in need. NIV*

Those that have support those who don't. It's the basic principle behind socialism and is the basis behind public welfare. Where did they get that idea from – the Bible. It is only fair that have support those in need. It is quite the reverse of societies where wealth is based on exploitation and greed – which ours also does. It's where the rich and powerful build their wealth by taking off those who can least afford it – a society of

exploitation. They didn't get that one from the Bible, but the Bible explains it – a simple consequence of the sin of selfishness.

So the Bible is the origin of the vision of the welfare state. Why doesn't the welfare state not work too well much of the time? The difference is the spirit in which this help was given: they were eager to give, and give in love! There was integrity in the giving and integrity in those who took the money and gave it to the Judeans.

So those that have should support the needs of the have-nots. The Judeans were the have-nots and the Corinthians willingly supported them. The whole idea was that if and when the tables were turned, in a Christian world, the helped would become helpers: *14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.* The goal is equality...

This is how the Message puts it: *you're shoulder to shoulder with them all the way, your surplus matching their deficit, their surplus matching your deficit. In the end you come out even.*

Where does that quote come from: Exodus 16:13 *In the evening a large flock of quails flew in, enough to cover the camp, and in the morning there was dew all around the camp. 14 When the dew evaporated, there was something thin and flaky on the surface of the desert. It was as delicate as frost. 15 When the Israelites saw it, they didn't know what it was and asked each other, "What is it?" Moses said to them, "This is the food that the LORD has given you to eat. 16 The LORD has commanded that each of you is to gather as much of it as he needs, two litres (an omer) for each member of his household." 17 The Israelites did this, some gathering more, others less. 18 When they measured it, those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little. Each had gathered just what he needed.*

We know this story well. It's about the giving of manna to the people of Israel. And Paul quotes verse 17 *The Israelites did this, some gathering more, others less.*

What that seems to mean is that people with large families gathered a lot and those with small gathered little. There was no point in gathering to much as it didn't keep. God had provided enough for everyone. The implication for this passage is that God always provides enough, it's just that it is unevenly distributed, so we are called to even out the distribution by ensuring that those who are without have enough. Look at it in terms of the grace theme of this passage. In His grace, the Lord has provided us with much wealth. He's given sufficient resources for ourselves and to share. So let's honour Him by sharing them.

It's a philosophy that goes against our society that applauds the acquisition of personal wealth and ignores the exploitation of others. But look at the present collapse of the economic world order. What caused it? The greed of the rich. Who is paying for it? Those that have little.

We're not called to greed, but to need. That's the way of the church. And it always has been. Never tire of giving. It's God's way that those who have much support those that have little as in this world there is enough for all.

I find it an irony that Christians in rising countries like Korea and Brazil as well as many African countries are sending missionaries and money into other countries, even the UK and Western Europe for mission and relief. Some of the churches in such countries are huge mission givers.

How do I conclude? This idea of giving freely, giving with grace, giving according to means, finishing the job and sharing what God has given us are all scriptural principles. They fall in sharp contrast to those who pressurise for money. They are in even sharper contrast to the world philosophy of acquiring and retaining wealth.

Paul encourages them to give but recognises motive and means. It's different from the legalism of tithing I've come across in many places and Paul probably had the same issue to address, particularly as Corinth had been afflicted with a dose of legalism. Giving is about grace. We've been shown grace, now let's show that grace to others, reflecting the measure of grace God had shown to us.