

A Wealth of Generosity

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 8, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ For those of you who weren't with us this past Sunday, we introduced a very short, two-part series on generosity. We're timing it with the pledge campaign that's going on right now for the building project that we've been telling you about. **We've got a three-phased master plan for renovating and expanding our current facilities.** If you're not familiar with the details, you should visit our website or the lobby table after service.
 - **Now taken together, the cost of doing all three phases (plus a sizable cushion for contingencies) comes out to \$25 million.** That's our God-sized fundraising goal. Now we already have some funds in our capital reserve and our designated building fund, and couple that with pledges that many of our leaders submitted back in May – we're already at 40% of our goal with \$10.1 million committed.
 - And now it's up to you – to get involved, to make a pledge, and to submit it by our January 31st deadline. Lord-willing, he will amaze us in the sovereign ways in which he moves people to give generously towards this project.
- ❖ Now today's message will be related to this campaign, and by next week, we'll be in our planned series through 1 Corinthians. But after service, every Sunday this month, during announcements, we plan to show short videos that highlight how a new building can be used in various ways to glorify God, impact lives, and advance gospel ministry in our city and beyond. **The hope is to get you excited about what God is doing and how you can enjoy the favor of taking part in this project!**
- ❖ Today, we'll be in 2 Corinthians 8. **This is the Apostle Paul writing to a specific church, in light of specific events that happened between them, about a specific fundraising effort that Paul had been promoting among churches that he planted.** So this text is about giving. But let's be clear, it's not about tithing to the church or any kind of regular offering.
 - It's about a one-time, special collection. A pledge campaign, if you will. Not for a building project. But for a relief effort. **It was a special collection among Gentile churches to aid poor and needy Christians in the Jerusalem church.** So that needs to be clarified up front. I chose this text not because our projects are the same – ours is a building project; theirs is a relief effort. **So I chose this text because the motive behind our generosity – towards a relief effort or a building project – should be the same.** It should be the grace of God. And that's what this text is all about.
- ❖ Notice how Paul begins in v1 saying, "*We want you to know, brothers.*" Now stop and ask, "What does he want them to know?" **If his goal is to get the Corinthian church to give towards this collection for the saints in Jerusalem, then what is Paul going to write about?** Does he want them to know how much the Macedonians gave? Does he want them to know how much more mature and healthy these other churches are?
 - No, what Paul wants them to know – first and foremost – is not focused on what other people are doing. It's focused on what God's doing. **He wants them to know about the grace of God.** "*We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.*"

- ❖ The Greek word for grace (*charis*) actually shows up five separate times in our text. In v1, as we just read. In v4, translated as “*favor*”. In vv6-7, when Paul speaks of this “*act of grace*”. And in v9, when referring to “*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Grace is the main theme.
 - Now what the churches in Macedonia did is pretty amazing. There’s no need to diminish the greatness of their gift. But what we’re going to see is that the most significant aspect of their generosity is not the amount nor even their attitude.
 - **The most important thing is what generated that attitude that led to that amount they gave, and that’s the grace of God.** So while Paul does point to the Macedonians as an example of surprising generosity in order to inspire the Corinthians to fulfill their pledge – my point is that Paul is most emphatic about the underlying grace of God.

- ❖ So that’s why this morning’s text is still relevant to us. We have a different project before us. **But what we share in common is that, much like the Corinthian church, we’ve made plans (and some of us have already made pledges) – and now what we need is motivation to complete the project.** Like the Corinthians, we can learn a lot from the example of the Macedonian churches, but we’ll only be moved and inspired to give like them if the grace of God is similarly given to us.
 - As we walk through our text, I want to make three key observations. We’ll see (1) a sensitive appeal to give, (2) a surprising overflow of generosity, and (3) a stimulus to finish what we started.

A Sensitive Appeal to Give

- ❖ The first thing to notice is Paul’s particular approach to bringing up the issue of money and giving towards this relief effort. **We’re going to see, coming from the Apostle, a pastorally sensitive appeal to give.** Now Paul has to approach this issue with care due to recent events in the Corinthian church that have to do with him.
 - **Previously, there had been a falling out between him and the church.** Things have improved, as I’ll explain in a second, but Paul is wise and discerning enough to know that now is *not* the time to simply exert his apostolic authority. That’s why you see him emphasize in v8 that he’s not issuing a command to give. “*I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.*”
 - In other words, his appeal – for them to fulfill their pledge – is *not* to suggest that this is how you show your obedience to me. But rather, this is how you prove the genuineness of your love for me as your apostle. I’m not telling you what to do. But I’m showing you why to do it and what difference it’ll make.

- ❖ Now to better understand his relationship with the Corinthian church, I’ll need to give you some background. So at the end of 1 Corinthians, in chapter 16, Paul informs them of his plans to visit, after traveling through Macedonia. And there he simply tells them what to do. He issues a direct command. “*Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.*” (1 Cor 16:1)

- ❖ He goes on to instruct them on how to prepare their gift for the suffering saints in Jerusalem. We're told, in 1 Corinthians 16:10, that Paul sent Timothy on ahead to prepare the Corinthians for the collection. **But when Timothy gets to Corinth, he discovers a church in turmoil.** False teachers had turned the church against Paul, pointing to his weakness and suffering as evidence that he's not blessed and Spirit-filled like them (2 Cor 11:5, 13).
 - So when Paul eventually heard Timothy's report, he made a sudden change of plans to travel straight to Corinth, to confront the open rebellion, and then to travel to Macedonia. And he planned one more visit to Corinth before heading off to Jerusalem to deliver the collection (1:15). **But that initial visit to Corinth, turned out to be very painful** (2:1). The church essentially rejected him.

- ❖ Now instead of disciplining them, right then and there, Paul bore the shame and simply left. He decided not to make that next visit he had planned (1:23), and instead he sent a letter through Titus. This letter, which some would call 3 (or 1.5) Corinthians, is lost to history and not considered God-inspired Scripture. **This was a tearful, hard letter for Paul to write.** Listen to chapter 2:1, *"¹For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. . . . ⁴For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you."*
 - It was a painful letter, but it had its intended effect. **It grieved the majority of the church members and led them to repentance.** Listen to chapter 7:8-9, *"⁸For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it – though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. ⁹As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting."* So when Titus returned and relayed to Paul the result of their godly grief, he was overjoyed.

- ❖ **So 2 Corinthians was written by Paul in hope that the Corinthians have genuinely repented and renewed their love for him** (8:24). And at this point in the letter, he raises the issue of their prior pledge to give towards this relief effort. He presents it as a tangible way to bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Lk 3:8) and prove the genuineness of their love.
 - Since he hasn't seen them since that last painful visit, Paul's not sure if their reported repentance is real and if their relationship is truly restored. That's why, as a wise and caring pastor, he treads carefully and sensitively, avoiding direct commands. **But in this chapter (and the next), he spends more time laying out principles for them to prayerfully consider.** Rather than just telling them what to do, Paul wants the Corinthians to decide for themselves what is the mature and godly thing to do.

- ❖ **Church, I want you to know that it's the desire of your pastors and elders to make our appeals to give to this building project with the same level of pastoral sensitivity.** It's not because there was beef between us. I'm not testing your love for me. No, the test is really for you. There's a self-examination that each of us can experience.
 - You see, if we just lay out bare commands for you to follow – if we guilt tripped you or placed a lot of social pressure on you to give – then you wouldn't have a chance to test your own hearts. So you wouldn't learn much about yourself.

- ❖ **It's only when you're given a choice – to freely give or to freely refrain from giving – only then would you know what's in your heart; what has a hold of your heart; what your heart priorities are.** So as your pastor, I try to resist the tendency to grip tightly, to not let go, to continue steering you by the sheer force of will and authority. That's not healthy.
 - As a father with a toddler at home – who loves to ride her bike even though she doesn't know how – you'll see me with a tight grip on the bike right now. I'm not letting go. And I'm steering her where I want her to go. And right now, she's having a blast. But at some point, I've got to let go to see if she knows how to balance herself and ride that thing. And I would be stunting her development – and ultimately stifling her joy of bike riding – if I refused to ever release control.

- ❖ **In the same way, your pastors and elders are not going to shepherd you with the rod in this matter over a pledge.** We're not going to command or demand anything of you. Like Paul, what we do want to offer are biblical principles for you to prayerfully consider. What we see in this text is Paul emphasizing that how you handle your money – and how you respond to projects and efforts aimed at helping others or advancing gospel ministry – that your response is a good barometer revealing the state of your heart, proving how much you trust God versus how much you trust money.
 - That's why we want to make a fundraising appeal, to which you can freely respond, and in the end, we hope you learn something about yourself. **And what we really hope you discover is that the grace of God has also been given to you.** To free you from the love of keeping money for yourself and to change your heart so that now you love to give money away to causes that glorify God and do good to others.

A Surprising Overflow of Generosity

- ❖ It's that same grace that was given to the Macedonian churches that produced a surprising overflow of generosity. This leads to our second observation. The Macedonian believers were poor in riches but rich in generosity. They were beset with afflictions but abounding in joy. Those are paradoxes that can only be explained by the grace of God.
 - Let me read vv1-2 again, *"¹We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part."*

- ❖ Now to really appreciate God's grace, we need to talk about the Macedonian churches and their situation. Notice in v2 how they're described as dealing with *"extreme poverty"*. **The Greek word for "extreme" is where we derived the name for a bathysphere.** Those are those large spherical deep-sea submersibles that researchers in the early 20th-century used to explore the bottom of the sea. **So when Paul says the Macedonians are extremely poor, just imagine them being bottom-of-the-sea deep in poverty.**

- ❖ And it's probably related to the “*severe test of affliction*” they were experiencing. Macedonia, as a region, included cities like Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. And we learn, in the book of Acts and in Paul's letters to these churches, that they were experiencing persecution (1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; Phil 1:27-30). **These believers were being socially ostracized and marginalized.** They were at a severe economic disadvantage for being a Christian since they were considered seditious and disloyal to the Roman Empire.
 - But that's why their behavior was so strange. These churches were simultaneously experiencing both an abundance of joy and extreme poverty (brought about by severe affliction) – and somehow the combination of all of that “*overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.*” That means their generosity was their wealth. Like I said, they may have been poor in riches, but they were rich in generosity!

- ❖ None of that makes sense to us, if we're being honest. When we think of God giving us grace, we picture him lifting our afflictions, resolving our problems, pulling us out of the pits of poverty. But as Paul goes on to explain in chapter 12, when he addresses his own personal thorns, **God's all-sufficient grace doesn't necessarily change your circumstances – but it does change your heart.** You begin to act strange like the Macedonians. Your circumstances might be difficult and dire – but your heart is determined to give to the Lord and to his work.
 - **According to v3, these Macedonian churches gave, not just according to their means, but beyond their means.** And they did so without any prompting on Paul's part. In fact, according to v5, he didn't even expect them to participate in the collection for poor Christians in Jerusalem. They were poor Christians in Macedonia!
 - **But we're told they begged Paul for the favor (the grace) of participating in this collection.** Let me read vv3-4, “*3For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, 4begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.*” What a reversal! It's not the apostle or the pastor of the church doing the begging. The members are the ones doing the begging. Begging for the gracious privilege to give. That's what you do with you're rich in generosity.

- ❖ Friends, that's inspiring and, at the same time, convicting. **Because the Macedonians did not use their poverty as an excuse not to participate.** Not having much money was no reason for them not to give. And that's convicting because that's the very reason why many of us don't give and don't participate in pledge campaigns like the one we're doing.
 - Perhaps you're still in school. Perhaps you're still early in your career. Perhaps you still have debt to pay off. So you tell yourself that you're too poor to participate. I'll let the older, richer, more established members take care of it. But how different were the Macedonian believers – they would've been begging for the chance to participate.

- ❖ Look, I'll be straight with you. **If you're disinclined towards generosity when you have very little, then there's very little chance of you suddenly becoming generous once you have a lot down the road.** It's not going to happen. Because, in the end, it's not about what's in your wallet. It's about what's in your heart.

- ❖ Let's say you have little money right now. But if you have a wealth of generosity in your heart – so that you give generously out of the little you do have, then down the road, if the Lord blesses you with more, you'll still be that generous person but now with much more to give. **So the point is – don't wait to start giving. Start now, even when you don't have a lot, and it'll become a habit of the heart – a habit of your generous heart.**
 - Friends, I know it's still hard to do. I know you're still not sure how you can ever become generous like these Macedonian believers. But I hope you understand that they didn't become generous by focusing on money and money management and fiscal stewardship. No, they focused on God and generosity was a byproduct.
 - Look at v5. Paul explains where their unexpected generosity came from. *“And this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”* **So the reason they could be so generous is because they had already dedicated themselves, first and foremost, to the Lord.**
- ❖ **It's easy to give away your money when you've already given away your life to the Lord.** If you've already surrendered your life to God, then surrendering your money to him is a natural byproduct. **So the natural question you need to ask yourself is whether or not you've surrendered to God.** Is he your Lord, your Master? Just ask: Who has the right to tell you what to do with your money? If your instinct is to think, “No one can tell me what to do. It's my money,” then it looks like, at this point, there's little chance you're going to be as generous as these Macedonians. You'll need to surrender first to the Lord.

A Stimulus to Finish What We Started

- ❖ And perhaps you need a good reason to do so. You need a strong stimulus. That leads to our third observation found in vv8-11. **Here we see Paul giving the Corinthians a strong stimulus to finish what they started.** Earlier in v6, he explains why he sent Titus back to Corinth (he was likely the bearer of this letter). Titus was to help them complete the collection that they had previously started – essentially to fulfill their pledge.
 - Listen to what Paul says in v10, *“¹⁰And 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. ¹¹So 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.”*
- ❖ So a year ago, they made a pledge to give towards this collection for suffering saints. Now they need to fulfill it. They need to finish what they started. But Paul is not going to give commands. He's going to offer motivation. He'll give them a stimulus. And he'll do that by pointing to two reference points – **the sacrificial earnestness of the Macedonians and the sacrificial grace of Christ.**
 - Look at v8 again. *“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.”* **Paul is hoping the earnestness of the Macedonians to give generously will serve as an inspiration to motivate the Corinthians to do the same and fulfill their pledge.** Fulfilling their pledge would be a fruit of repentance and a sign of their genuine love for him and for all the saints.

- ❖ **But while the sacrificial earnestness of the Macedonians was certainly inspirational, Paul knows that the greater motivation to stimulate anyone to give freely and generously is when you receive, by faith, the free and generous sacrifice of Christ.** Look at v9, *“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.”*
- ❖ If the sacrifice of the Macedonians, which they accomplished in such poverty, was so inspirational, then how much more is what Christ has done for us – especially when you consider the extreme depths of poverty into which he dove.
 - **Those words “*though he was rich*” refer to Jesus’s eternal preexistence in glory.** From all eternity past, he was glorified by angels singing around his throne, *“Holy, holy, holy.”* (Isa 6:1-3) He enjoyed all the privileges of the High King of Heaven. *“Yet for your sake, he became poor.”* That’s referring to his incarnation and crucifixion. Jesus emptied himself. He took on the form of a servant. And humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a shameful cross.
- ❖ And why would he stoop so low? *“So that you, by his poverty, might become rich.”* **So that you who believe would receive all the benefits of his crucifixion and the atonement he accomplished.** Now our riches in Christ could refer to our heavenly inheritance and all our treasures in heaven. But in the context of 2 Corinthians, those riches that Christ gave us would probably refer to the righteousness of God.
 - 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, *“For our sake he [Father] made him [Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* **Because Christ impoverished himself – we are now rich in God’s righteousness!** And through that gift of righteousness, we are reconciled with God (5:18). Which would suggest that having a right relationship with God is where our true wealth lies.
- ❖ **Paul’s whole point here is that Jesus voluntarily impoverished himself to enrich others – which includes you if you are a Christian – so now go and do the same.** Give voluntarily and give sacrificially. Give until it hurts. Impoverish yourself, in a sense, in order to enrich others. That’s what the Macedonians did for the saints. And that’s what Jesus did for us.
 - **Church, would you join me in praying that the same grace of God that was given to the churches in Macedonia would be poured out on us – moving all of us to demonstrate a surprising, unexpected generosity?**
- ❖ **For those with very little, may you be so changed by the grace of God that we hear of you begging earnestly for the favor of taking part in our building project.** Wouldn’t that be amazing to hear of children begging their parents for the privilege to participate and to make their own pledge? That would be an act of grace. **And for those with plenty, may you be so changed by God’s grace that you follow in your Lord’s example and voluntarily impoverish yourself to enrich others.** I know our fundraising goal seems unattainable. But who are we to put a cap on the grace of God? **His grace is sufficient for all our needs. So if he grants us that grace, nothing is impossible.** We can finish what we started.