Great Grace Should Produce Great Generosity

Each One Reach One: The Cost and Rewards

2 Corinthians 8:1-24

Pastor Bryan Clark

So how do you explain a selfish Christian? It just doesn't seem to make sense. We raised a similar question when we were going through 1 Corinthians, only we asked the question, "How do you explain an arrogant Christian?" If we really believe on the basis of grace that God has done it all—we're just simply the recipients—how could that possibly make you arrogant?

In a similar way, if we really embrace this scandalous thing we call grace—that God has poured out His favor upon us that we don't deserve— how do you respond to that by being selfish? It just doesn't make any sense. There's a disconnect somewhere. Of all the people in the culture, shouldn't we who embrace this scandalous message of grace be the most out-of-step with the materialism, with the idolatry, with the selfishness of the culture? So are we?

As a matter of fact, couldn't we push the question all the way down to: If a Christian is selfish, couldn't we say that Christian still doesn't really understand the meaning of Christmas? That's what Paul wants to talk to us about today. If you have a Bible, turn with me to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 8. If you're new with us today, we've been working our way through 2 Corinthians. From Chapter 2 all the way through Chapter 7 there has kind of been this running train of thought. One of the dominant features was the word *therefore. Therefore, because this is true…therefore this is true….therefore*....it's just kind of a running discussion. But that closes at the end of Chapter 7. Chapter 8, Verse 1, opens with the word, "*Now"*. Typically, in Paul's letters, the word *now* indicates a change of subject and that is certainly the case here.

Now I have to give you just a little bit of background. We know from the Book of Acts and we also know from history that there was about a ten year famine down in Judea, around Jerusalem —in that area. This would have been on the tail end of that famine. For the people in Judea it was very difficult. For the Christians it was extremely difficult.

We know from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 16, that the Corinthians themselves initiated an idea: "*Why don't we take an offering?"* Up where they were in Corinth things were going well. They were prosperous. There was really no persecution. *"Why don't we take an offering? We have more than we need and we'll help our brothers and sisters in Judea."* So that's the background to this discussion in Chapter 8 of 2 Corinthians.

> **Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality.**
>
> (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 8:1-2)

Now that's a mouthful. He starts by saying that the churches in Macedonia understood and embraced this radical concept of grace. We're going to find out that grace is a significant part of the discussion in Chapters 8 and 9. It shows up ten times in these two chapters and the idea is those who have experienced God's grace, it would be grace *to* you in order that it might be grace *through*

you. In other words grace is not to be consumed upon ourselves. Grace *to* me so that grace flows *through* me. Now that's a biblical principle in both the Old and New Testaments. It's worded different ways. In the Old Testament we find out that the people of God were blessed to be a blessing. We find out in 2 Corinthians that we have been comforted in order to comfort, that we have been reconciled in order to fulfill a ministry of reconciliation. Grace has come to us that grace might flow through us and Paul is using the Macedonian churches as a model of that.

Now the Macedonian churches would be Thessalonica, would be Philippi, and would be our namesake Berea. Not only were the Bereans a people that were diligent in the Scriptures, they were also a people of radical generosity, as are many of you. That's our namesake.

Paul says the churches of Macedonia were**...in a great ordeal of affliction.** That word *ordeal i*s a Greek word that means *to test*, like to test a precious metal to see if it's pure, to test a coin to see if it's authentic. The idea of **a great ordeal of affliction** is saying that they were in the midst of fiery persecution. The churches in Macedonia were going through very difficult persecution. So how did they respond to that? With an **abundance of joy**! Wow! **An abundance of joy in their deep poverty!** That word **deep** means *down to the depth.* I think we would say today *rock-bottom poverty.* These people were undergoing persecution. They were at rock-bottom poverty and yet it **overflowed in the wealth of their liberality**. In other words they were extraordinarily generous.

So Paul's opening statement is that because these people understood grace in the midst of fiery persecution, they were characterized by an abundance of joy and by remarkable generosity.

Verse 3:

> **For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.** (Vs. 3-5)

Paul says that they gave **according to their ability**. That wording is important. It will come up several times. If I give something that's a portion of what I have, but if I give according to my ability, that's proportion to what I have. God asks us to give in response to what He's given to us. It's not just a portion. It's in proportion. God doesn't measure your gift by anybody else's gift. It's not a competition. But He does measure your gift on the basis of what you have in proportion to what He's given to you. So Paul says that they gave **according to their ability and beyond their ability.** Paul says they gave reasonably what they could afford to give, but then they turned around and gave more than that. And then he says something really quite remarkable as a matter of fact—**of their own accord**. There was no fundraiser in town manipulating them. They initiated the idea all the way to the extent that they were actually begging Paul, urging him—begging Paul for the opportunity to be a part of giving to help their brothers and sisters who were enduring this famine.

Now that's a remarkable thing! I don't think I've ever seen it before—people saying, *"Please, Please take another offering!"* But that's what they were doing. They were begging Paul, *"Please let us participate!"* And they not only gave according to their means, but beyond that! Extraordinary generosity! Paul says, "We hadn't expected this." But the reason they did it is because they first had given themselves to the Lord. On the basis of grace their response was, *"God, my life is yours! Everything I have is yours!"* And they gave themselves to the Lord and

they gave themselves to Paul and his team—in other words to the mission that God had called them to. So Paul is celebrating this remarkable group of churches in Macedonia.

He says in verse 6:

> **So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well.**

In other words, because of what happened in Macedonia, Titus was renewed in his desire to go back to Corinth and say, "*Hey, Folks, you came up with the idea to begin with. Let's finish what we started and we'll take the offering and we'll help our brothers and sisters in Judea."*

Verse 7:

> **But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.**

A very interesting verse there. Paul is saying that, on the basis of grace, giving is as essential to our faith—is as much a part of our faith—as faith! Can you imagine a Christian with no faith? How about a Christian with no knowledge? How about a Christian with no love? We would say that doesn't make sense in the same way Paul said, "How do you explain a Christian that doesn't give?" That's the essence; that's the core of who we are. Giving is as much a part of our faith as faith, as love, as knowledge.

Verse 8:

> **I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. 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 through His poverty might become rich.** (Vs. 8-9)

That's the essence of Christmas. This is a great Christmas text—"*That He who was rich for your sake became poor in order that through His poverty **you** might become rich*." How do you believe that and embrace that and come out selfish? What sense does that make? There's a disconnect somewhere. Paul is saying on the basis of grace, if we get this, if we get the core of what Christmas is about, that our response ought to be generosity. Great grace ought to produce great generosity.

Let's imagine, since we've just come off the Thanksgiving holiday, that I am very poor. I'm homeless poor; you're having a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner and you invite me to share your Thanksgiving dinner with you. So I come and it's a magnificent meal. But, as I'm going in the house, I happen to notice that there is a young homeless child sitting on the front steps and it's obvious that child hasn't eaten for days. And so the host family says, "You know we need to invite that child in and share what we have." And immediately I say, "Whoa...No! What are you talking about? There might not be enough! This is for me!" They assure me there's plenty. I say, "There might not be enough! I might want to have leftovers later! Please don't share with that starving child."

We would never, never do that.....would we?

If we have consumed the grace of God on ourselves and, as a result of that, become selfish, unwilling to share with others who have not yet heard the message, how is that different? *How* is that different? The essence of the message of Christmas is generosity. **He who was rich, for your sake became poor, in order that through His poverty *you* might become rich.** How does that message make us selfish? What are we *not* getting? That's the essence of what Christmas is all about.

Verse 10:

> **I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. But now finish doing it also; so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability.** (Vs. 10-11)

One of the things I love about the Scriptures is they're so very relevant. This is just so practical. The Corinthians came up with the idea: *"Let's take an offering. Let's help our brothers down in Judea who are suffering famine."* Great idea!—Great intentions! —But they just couldn't pull the trigger. How many times has that been true of all of us? We have great thoughts, great ideas about generosity. They just never make it to the follow-through. Paul is urging them to finish what they've started.

You've heard the old saying that: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." We might alter it to say, "The road to materialism is paved with generous thoughts." *"Hey I thought about being generous once…just didn't work out."* **He who is rich, for your sake became poor, in order that through His poverty you might become rich**. How does that make us selfish?

Over the years I've tried to figure out different excuses we might use to justify our selfishness. I don't think we need much encouragement in this area. I know I've irritated a number of you. I think it has to do with retirement. I'm all for retirement—I think that's very prudent—but at some point, "Enough is enough". Beyond that, it's selfishly hoarding. Another is under the umbrella of inheritance. I can justify saving unimaginable amounts of money in order to store them in a bank, in order to pass them on to my children. How is that not selfish? Help me understand that: How is that not selfish that I consume God's blessings upon myself and my family?

But this morning I have a new one for you, just to see if I can irritate even more people. (Laughter) I want to talk about this idea that is so prevalent today—about getting out of debt. I think people have figured out a way to use this to excuse their selfishness. Now please understand me; I think being debt free is wonderful. That's a great goal; that's a good thing. Brent, write this down: I said that being debt free is good. (I might have to call you midweek.) It's good, okay? You hear me on that? But we need to think about some things. Number one: you have to understand that debt, as it's talked about in the Scriptures—from an ancient culture—is like comparing apples and oranges today. Those who were lenders in the ancient world were more like what we think of today as *loan sharks*. It's very risky business. You often did it because you were desperate and you often ended up being a slave. So it's strongly spoken against.

But debt in the ancient world and debt today is apples and oranges. Often today it's much more of a business arrangement. For example most of us do not have the cash to plop down on the table to buy a house. If that's what we have to do, most of us would never own a home. So there are lenders

who lend us the money and there's a fee we pay for using their money. We understand the arrangement. They understand the arrangement. We sign off on it; it's a business arrangement and in many ways it's a *win-win* proposition. We get to own a home that we never would have owned otherwise and they make a profit on their money. There's nothing unbiblical about that; there's nothing wrong with that. The problem is when people begin to abuse that and they start buying homes they can't afford. They start buying cars they can't afford. They start using credit cards to buy things they can't afford and pretty soon it's out of control and we're living in a means we simply cannot support. In our culture, then, you turn around and declare bankruptcy and you don't pay the people you owe money to and that's wrong.

So it is a good thing—it's an essential thing—to live within your means and it's a very good thing to have a goal to be debt free. But if the next ten years of your life are spent consuming your riches upon yourself for the goal of becoming debt free, how is that not selfish? Are you thinking at the end of the ten years Jesus is going to say, "Yes, that's what I wanted from you"? I don't think so. He's going to say, "You just consumed everything I gave you on yourself and somehow you justified that that's what I wanted."

If we're serious about this debt-free thing, fine, let's do it. Let's get it done in sixty days. Let's sell our homes and downsize. Let's downsize our cars. Let's sell half our property. Let's get debt free in sixty days, then live within our means and then learn to be generous.

> *"Whoa…don't want to do that. I know I may have bought a house I couldn't afford and I know I bought vehicles I can't afford and I know I bought a lot of stuff I couldn't afford, but for the next ten years I'm going to work really hard and I'm going to pay it off."*

Okay, let me see; I think I understand this. You're going to spend the next ten years consuming your resources upon yourself in order to pay for things you never should have purchased in the first place and you think somehow God will be pleased with that? Is that making sense to anybody? How is that not just selfish? We don't need any more excuses to be selfish. It comes too easily. God has called us to be wise managers in order that we might be generous. That's what God wants from us. He says...

Verse 12:

> **For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.**

Again, "***...according to***". God is not asking you to give what you don't have but, if God blesses you, He's asking you to turn around and give in proportion to that. Now this is again sometimes where we get stuck. You go home this afternoon; you do your budget and you say, "You know we just don't have it, just can't afford to give—just don't have it." Yes, that's probably true. You don't have it because of the lifestyle you've chosen, because you're still walking in step with the materialistic, idolatrous, selfish world. The only way we'll ever be generous is if we march to a different drummer, if we say, "No" to the materialism and the selfishness of the culture and choose to live at a different level so that we have the freedom to be generous with what God has done—with what God has given us. **He who was rich for your sake became poor, in order that through His poverty you might become rich.** Why would that not make us generous? Why would that not change what we live for? Why would that not change our priorities and values? We give according to what He has given us.

Verse 13:

> **For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."** (Vs. 13-15)

Now this is not a biblical justification for socialism. That's not what he's saying. There are a lot of differences. For starters, this is the church; it's not the government. It's willful, joyful giving. It's not a tax. It's not required. But thirdly, it's not saying everybody has an equal amount of money in the bank, that everybody has equal size houses and cars and all that. What he is saying is there's equality in the basic needs of life. If God has blessed you in such a way that you have more than you need and there are others who don't have the basic necessities of life, why wouldn't you share that to make sure that everybody has the basic necessities of life?

He makes this case by quoting from Exodus, Chapter 16. When the children of Israel were in the wilderness and God provided for them by delivering manna from heaven every day, and every day they would go out and some would collect a lot and some would collect a little because they had different needs. But, at the end of the day, they all had enough.

By the way, if you want to know how God feels about hoarding, go back and read the text for yourself—Exodus 16. Whenever someone would think, *"You know I don't know if God's going to show up tomorrow. Even though He's been faithful every day, He might sleep in tomorrow so I better collect a little extra today just in case God doesn't show up tomorrow*." God said, "Every time you do that, I'm going to spoil it. Nobody saves from one day to the next. Every day you trust Me and I will provide what you need."

Verse 16:

> **But thanks be to God, who puts the same earnestness on your behalf in the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest, he has gone to you of his own accord. We have sent along with him the brother whose fame in the things of the gospel has spread through all the churches; and not only this, but he has also been appointed by the churches to travel with us in this gracious work, which is being administered by us for the glory of the Lord Himself, and to show our readiness, taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. We have sent with them our brother, whom we have often tested and found diligent in many things, but now even more diligent, because of his great confidence in you. As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ. Therefore openly before the churches, show them the proof of your love and of our reason for boasting about you.** (Vs. 16-24)

This last section of chapter 8 is just Paul saying that Titus has been energized to come. He's going to collect the offering. We're sending two brothers with him that you know and you trust, so

everything is aboveboard, so there is the utmost integrity, so that you will know that this offering will go exactly where it is intended.

Now Paul is going to roll this discussion into 2 Corinthians, Chapter 9, where he's going to remind us of the very important truth—that one of the reasons we give generously to God is because God is generous in return. We'll talk about that next week.

For this morning, as we think about this text, I want us to think about it as it relates to Christmas. We're just rolling into the Christmas season. The essence of Christmas is that **He who was rich for your sake became poor, in order that through His poverty *you* might become rich**—in order that you might be selfish. Oh no, that's not how it reads, is it? It doesn't make any sense! There's a disconnect there. It's all well and good to admire that Jesus was born in a manger, in a feed trough, in a stable. We like to talk about those things. But, if we're not generous people, we missed it! Jesus became poor for *us* in order that, like Him, we might be generous with what He's given to us.

One of the best ways to process this I think is just to imagine the conversation you're going to have with God when you give an account. You're not going to give an account to me. You don't have to explain anything to me. You don't answer to me. But you are going to answer to God. How did you steward what you have been given? When you look at the way we as Americans live, compared to the rest of the world, give me some idea of how that conversation is going to go when we're trying to explain why it was okay for me to be selfish. What are you going to say that is going to cause God to say, "Oh, okay, I get it now; okay, that's all right."?

We are a blessed people, but God expects us to be generous with what we've been given. One would have to say—"If you were not a generous person, you don't get Christmas." You just don't. But maybe this Christmas season will be a season when it finally sinks in. Hey, **He was rich but for your sake He became poor, in order that through His poverty you might become rich.** If that's true, how could I not be a generous person?

Our Father, we're thankful this morning for Your generosity. Lord, many this Christmas season will again admire that Jesus was born in a stable. He was laid in a manger—everything so humble— and yet we turn right around and live a lifestyle totally contradictory to that. It doesn't even sink in that we really don't get it. Lord, there are many here this morning who are generous. They get this. They're generous like the Macedonians. They model what You called us to and, Lord, I thank you for that. Lord, I pray for all of us that this Christmas we would understand Your grace to the point that we become generous people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. Which do you think is more true; the more we have the more generous we become or the more we have the more we trust in what we have?

2. Is it really possible to understand grace and not be a generous giver?

Bible Study

1. Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7. Describe the giving of the Macedonia Churches (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea). How would you summarize their giving in one or two words?

2. Read 2 Corinthians 8:7-15. In what way is Jesus the motivation for grace giving? Compare Philippians 2:1-11. How would you describe someone who embraces all that Jesus did for us but is unwilling to be generous in return?

3. What are some principles of grace giving from this text?

4. Paul uses Exodus 16:1-21 to help make his point in this text. What do we learn about how God feels about hoarding from the Exodus text? What's the difference between being responsible stewards with our money and hoarding?

5. Read 2 Corinthians 8:16-24. What does Paul do to preserve the integrity of the gift? How do we make sure in the day in which we live that our offerings go to organizations which operate with integrity?

Application

1. List three things you either learned from this text or were reminded of from this text?

2. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being poor and 10 being faithful) how would you rate your financial stewardship at this point in your Christian walk? What is one thing you need to prayerfully consider to grow in this area?

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