

The Grace of Christian Giving

Lesson Scope: 2 Corinthians 8 and 9

Lesson Focus

Paul was preparing for his final journey to Jerusalem. Earlier, when the Jerusalem apostles had given Paul the right hand of fellowship to go to the Gentiles, they especially asked him to remember the poor (Galatians 2:9-10). Ministering to the poor had been central to the example of Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46) and to the practice of the early church (Acts 4:31-37).

In spite of the apostles' approval on Paul's ministry, tension continued to exist between Jew and Gentile Christians (Acts 21:20-25). Paul desired that this collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem would stimulate the grace of Christian giving among the Gentile churches. Paul also sought to commend the Gentile believers' faith to the Jewish Christians by this expression of virtue (2 Corinthians 9:12-15). His heart cry was that the Gentile believers might find acceptance with the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:31).

In this lesson, notice that Paul reminds the Corinthians of their previous commitment to this need (2 Corinthians 8:10-11). Their zeal had inspired the Macedonians. Generosity is the Christian response to the example of Christ (2 Corinthians 8:9) and to God's unspeakable gift (2 Corinthians 9:15).

God's work of grace in the heart produces a life of self-denial and generosity. As the believer gives himself to the Lord, he abounds in the grace of Christian giving.

Christian giving and receiving works only for truly Christian people. One observer commented regarding our brotherhood assistance, "It would take a special kind of people to make a system like that work." How true! Only God's Spirit can make the kind of unselfish givers and receivers who grow into a true Christian fellowship.

There are certain mechanical aspects of Christian giving. Not every brotherhood has the same methods of handling church charities. As in other areas of life, no system is better than the people who run it. We

can see the mechanical aspects of giving but for to guide and instruct our own lives we also need to focus on the kind of people who give generously and receive graciously as examples.

Lesson Aim: To present New Testament principles for giving.

Theme Verse: Acts 20:35. I have skewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive.

Lesson Text

"First a Willing Mind"

2 Corinthians 8:1-15 ¹ Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia; ² How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality. ³ For to *their* power, I bear record, yea, and beyond *their* power *they were* willing of themselves; ⁴ Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and *take upon us* the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. ⁵ And *this they did*, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. ⁶ Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also. ⁷ Therefore, as ye abound in every *thing*, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, *see* that ye abound in this grace also. ⁸ I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love. ⁹ For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. ¹⁰ And herein I give *my* advice: for this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago. ¹¹ Now therefore perform the doing of *it*; that as *there was* a readiness to will, so *there may be* a performance also out of that which ye have. ¹² For if there be first a willing mind, *it is* accepted according to that a man hath, *and* not according to that he hath not. ¹³ For *I mean* not that other men be eased, and ye burdened: ¹⁴ But by an equality, *that* now at this time your abundance *may be a supply* for their want, that their abundance also may be *a supply* for your want: that there may be

equality: ¹⁵ As it is written, He that *had gathered* much had nothing over; and he that *had gathered* little had no lack.

"Providing for Honest Things"

2 Corinthians 8:16-21 ¹⁶ But thanks *be* to God, which put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you. ¹⁷ For indeed he accepted the exhortation; but being more forward, of his own accord he went unto you. ¹⁸ And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise *is* in the gospel throughout all the churches; ¹⁹ And not *that* only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and *declaration of* your ready mind: ²⁰ Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us: ²¹ Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.

"Enriched in Every Thing"

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 ⁶ But this *I say*, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. ⁷ Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, *so let him give*; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God *is* able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all *things*, may abound to every good work: ⁹ (As it is written, He hath dispersed abroad; he hath given to the poor: his righteousness remaineth for ever. ¹⁰ Now he that ministereth seed to the sower both minister bread for *your* food, and multiply your seed sown, and increase the fruits of your righteousness;) ¹¹ Being enriched in every thing to all bountifulness, which causeth through us thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the administration of this service not only supplieth the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God; ¹³ Whiles by the experiment of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the gospel of Christ, and for *your* liberal distribution unto them, and unto all *men*; ¹⁴ And by their prayer for you, which long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you. ¹⁵ Thanks *be* unto God for his unspeakable gift.

Questions for Study

"First a Willing Mind"

1. What motivated the poverty-stricken Macedonians to give so generously?
2. How is Jesus Christ our example in giving?
3. Does abundance produce generosity? Explain.

"Providing for Honest Things"

4. What qualifications are necessary for those entrusted with charitable gifts?
5. What practices safeguard honesty in giving and receiving?

"Enriched in Every Thing"

6. How does the law of sowing and reaping relate to our giving?
7. In what ways does God enrich the cheerful giver?
8. What do we have that we can give?

Analyzing the Passage

The free and spontaneous nature of God's grace is demonstrated in our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 8:9). Christ, who was richer than man could ever become, gave more than a man could ever give. He lived among the poor as one of them, so that by His poverty man could experience wealth he did not deserve.

The liberality of God's grace through Christ is expressed by "all grace," "abound," "all sufficiency in all things" (2 Corinthians 9:8), "enriched," "all bountifulness" (2 Corinthians 9:11), "exceeding grace" (2 Corinthians 9:14), and "unspeakable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15). Jesus foretold this overflowing abundance of grace. "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38). God is the greatest giver, and man can never outgive Him. Paul applied the law of sowing and reaping to Christian giving. Those who sow generously lay up treasures in heaven and reap a rich Christian experience. "There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth.... The [generous] soul shall be made fat" (Proverbs 11:24-25).

"God is able" (2 Corinthians 9:8). The Christian sows in faith that God will provide the harvest (Ecclesiastes 11:6).

Principles and Applications

"First a Willing Mind"

1. Saints in affliction and poverty feel compassion for the needs of others (2 Corinthians 8:2). Has affluence hardened our hearts? Do we give a little of our abundance to quiet our conscience while we look the other way as we pass by the needs of others? Do we reason that most people are poor because of their own mismanagement? Must we experience poverty to see how small our true needs really are?

2. A Christian gives willingly (2 Corinthians 8:3-4, 12). The compassion of Christ in his heart causes him to see needs around him, and he gives because of a heartfelt burden. Our congregations need to be informed of church needs, but we should not have to beg for money. When benefit auctions, chicken barbecues, or retirement-fund offers are used to fund church programs and needs, the "willing heart" is often missing or lacking.

We need to develop a willing heart in our children. They should not expect presents and favors from others. They must learn to share, not because we force them, but because it is good and right. If they grow something and sell it, they should give some of the profit to the Lord.

3. Liberal giving begins with personal consecration (2 Corinthians 8:5). Personal consecration sanctifies our contribution for God's honor. We will not give to be seen of men. When personal consecration puts our hearts into the needs of others, we will not think so much of our own needs or wants. Personal consecration gives all to the Lord—our will, mind, money, time, talents—whatever we are and have. Even the pots and pans of the housewife are holiness unto the Lord (Zechariah 14:20-21).

4. Jesus is our supreme example in giving (2 Corinthians 8:9). Jesus saw the needs of men and was moved with compassion (Matthew 9:35-37). Our homes should be oases in a barren world. Do we open our hearts and even our homes to neighbors whose lives are broken by sin? Do we talk with our children about those who have no Bibles or who have not heard of Jesus? Do we talk with them about starving multitudes? Do our children know about persecuted Christians or those who desperately need sound doctrinal literature to build solid churches before many are led astray? What is our home working for—the Gospel or the American dream? Do our children understand the truth of 1 John

3:16-17? "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

5. Christian giving produces a sense of equality in the brotherhood (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). Life is full of changing situations. Adversity comes to rich and poor alike. No one is always a giver. No one is always a receiver. Sometimes the rich can exercise the grace of receiving. Often the poor have something to share. Christian giving does not provide ease for some at others' expense. Giving in a Christian brotherhood has no relation to political communism and socialism.

"Providing for Honest Things"

6. Trusted men must have the oversight of brotherhood charities (2 Corinthians 8:16, 18-21). The seven deacons were to be "men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Both bishops and deacons are to be free from greed (I Timothy 3:3, 8) and blameless (Titus 1:6, 7; 1 Timothy 3:7, 10). Gifts must be distributed according to need without partiality. These fruits of godly character build confidence in the brotherhood.

7. All aspects of Christian giving must appear honest before all (2 Corinthians 8:20-21). It is best to have two brethren count the offering. Giving should be mostly anonymous. It is not good for anyone, even the ordained, to know how much anyone gives. All accounts should be audited by qualified people who take their work seriously. Auditing involves more than a signature at the bottom of a sheet. Financial reports should be accurate and easily understood.

"Enriched in Every Thing"

8. God's rewards far exceed our giving (2 Corinthians 9:6, 8, 11, 15). Today we sow through giving, as did the generations before us. God blessed their sowing, and we reap that good harvest, far more than was sown. We give back to God much less than He gives us. The bountifulness of God's blessing brings thanksgiving to His Name.

What we give returns to us. We go to encourage others, and we are encouraged. When we praise the Lord, others will join us. We teach the truth, and we are edified when we see truth practiced. We give out of our poverty, and we see the Lord provide.

9. Christian giving should be planned and voluntary (2 Corinthians 9:7). If we give only because we feel it is our duty, we will miss a great blessing. If you do not feel like giving, give anyway; it is still the right thing to do.

Our income should determine our giving plan. But how fixed should our plan be? Should not a large and unexpected need in the brotherhood bring a generous response from us?

10. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). How dry the soul who complains of helping with a street meeting! How meager the love that complains of his brother's hospital bill! How crippled the feet that cannot run to his brother's fire because he planned to visit the aquarium! The needs around us are an opportunity! How else could we express Christ's love? The needs around us are a test! How else can we prove our Christianity?

11. Christian giving brings glory to God (2 Corinthians 9:13-14). When we see the work of God in our brothers' hearts, we praise God. We also have a deepened love for the church when we are strengthened in adversity. What is the greatest benefit from Christian giving? Is it because our needs are met or because we see God working in our brethren?

Important Teachings

1. Saints in affliction and poverty feel compassion for the needs of others (2 Corinthians 8:2).
2. A Christian gives willingly (2 Corinthians 8:3-4, 12).
3. Liberal giving begins with personal consecration (2 Corinthians 8:5).
4. Jesus is our supreme example in giving (2 Corinthians 8:9).
5. Christian giving produces a sense of equality in the brotherhood (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).
6. Trusted men must have the oversight of brotherhood charities (2 Corinthians 8:16, 18-21).
7. All aspects of Christian giving must appear honest before all (2 Corinthians 8:20-21).
8. God's rewards far exceed our giving (2 Corinthians 9:6, 8, 11, 15).
9. Christian giving should be planned and voluntary (2 Corinthians 9:7).
10. God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).
11. Christian giving brings glory to God (2 Corinthians 9:13-14).
12. Giving is an essential part of well-rounded Christian practice (2 Co-

inthians 8:7).

13. In God's sight, the amount given is less significant than the motive for giving (2 Corinthians 8:12).

Answers to Questions

1. What motivated the poverty-stricken Macedonians to give so generously?

The grace of God worked in their lives. They were experiencing Christian joy in their affliction. Their joy prevented self-pity. Instead, their own poverty mixed with Christian joy caused them to be sensitive to others' needs. They first gave themselves to the Lord and the church. Their surrender to the Lord and His work in their hearts produced a willing mind.

2. How is Jesus Christ our example in giving?

Jesus gave up the glories of heaven to live among the poor of the earth. He was born in a stable—homeless, without a place to lay His head. He suffered the limitations of human life. He finally gave His own life that we might know the riches of His grace and enjoy His eternal presence.

3. Does abundance produce generosity? Explain.

No. Generosity is produced by thankfulness to God and a sense of unworthiness of His blessing. Christian love (agape) moves us to care for others. A Christian witness may influence society to take responsibility for the needy. Without Christ in the heart or the influence of Christianity, abundance produces selfishness. Humanism may mimic Christianity on occasion, but in the end will result in a tiered society, selfish consumption, and outright waste.

4. What qualifications are necessary for those entrusted with charitable gifts?

They must have an earnest care for souls. They must be chosen by the church. They must be praiseworthy and blameless in character. They must be honest, shunning any questionable appearances in handling finances.

5. What practices safeguard honesty in giving and receiving?

We safeguard our charities when two people count the offering, when giving is anonymous, when charities are distributed impartially, and when accounts are conscientiously audited. Those who receive gifts from the church should receive them thankfully without stipulating the

amount.

6. How does the law of sowing and reaping relate to our giving?

Our gifts are the seed. God sends rain, wind, and sunshine on the natural seed and gives a harvest as He sees fit. Similarly, He will take our gifts and bless them to accomplish His purposes. The bountiful harvest comes not by the quantity of the gift but by the spirit in which it is given.

7. In what ways does God enrich the cheerful giver?

The giver experiences God's favor because "God loveth a cheerful giver." God makes all grace abound toward the giver and supplies him with spiritual virtue and power so that he abounds in every good work. A bond of brotherhood is established between the giver and receiver so that Christian fellowship and mutual prayer for one another increases.

8. What do we have that we can give?

Some may have money. Some may be as Peter and John, who had no silver and gold but had the power and message of Jesus Christ. Some may give encouragement, a cup of cold water, a meal, a card, or a visit. Some may give a day of labor or a night of caring for the sick. Some may have an inspiration from the Scripture to share. Some may be in bed, praying for others.

Summarizing the Lesson

Christian giving is a tangible expression of intangible spiritual fellowship among us. Christian giving and receiving intertwines our lives in a web of Christian love. The giver receives and the receiver gives.

Research Guide

1. Study other occasions of New Testament sharing (Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-37; 6:1-8; 9:36-43; 11:27-30).

2. For the story of how Lancaster County Mennonites helped those who moved to Canada, read pages 393 and 394 in *The Earth Is the Lord's*.

3. For the story of how the Dutch and Palatinate Mennonites helped the Swiss refugees, see *Documents of Brotherly Love* (James Lowry), pages 373-408, especially page 389.

4. Read the poem "How the Great Guest Came" by Edwin Markham (*The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, p. 296).