

# Principles for Christian Giving

2 Corinthians 8:10–15

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## Introduction

We return again to our series in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, so please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 8. Our text for this morning will be 2 Corinthians chapter 8, verses 10 to 15, but I'd like to begin by reading the opening 15 verses of the chapter. 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1 to 15. "Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup>that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. <sup>3</sup>For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, <sup>4</sup>begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, <sup>5</sup>and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. <sup>6</sup>So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. <sup>13</sup>For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—<sup>14</sup>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; <sup>15</sup>as it is written, "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack."

Well, as is plain from that reading, we find ourselves in this two-chapter section in 2 Corinthians where Paul is addressing the matter of Christian giving. In these two chapters, Paul is writing to the Corinthians about a collection he is overseeing in order to relieve the financial burdens of the church in Jerusalem. Apparently, as we learn from these verses as well as a mention of it in 1 Corinthians 16, the Corinthians had known about this offering since the previous year, and had even made a beginning in setting aside resources in order to participate. But those preparations were stalled, likely due to the deceptions of the false apostles who, in an effort to cast aspersions

upon Paul's character, assailed his integrity and suggested, among other things, that he was only worked up about this collection in order to pocket the money for himself!

Well, we learn from the first seven chapters of this letter—especially chapters 2 and 7—that the majority of the Corinthians had come to their senses, had disciplined the divisive man who had then repented, they had repudiated the false apostles' teaching, and had reaffirmed their love and loyalty to Paul. So with that out the way, Paul now writes to stir the Corinthians up to renewed engagement in this offering, to urge them to pick up where they left off, and to bring to completion what they had begun a year ago. And in these two chapters, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, through the Apostle Paul's instructions concerning the offering to the poor saints in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit bequeaths to us what could be called the most detailed theology of Christian giving in all of Scripture—timeless principles for how the church of God in all ages is to think about finances, stewardship, and generosity.

And so far we've explored the first nine verses of this theology of Christian giving. In the first five verses, Paul begins his appeal by setting forth the churches of Macedonia as an example of generosity to be imitated. And we gleaned several principles for Christian giving by observing their example. We saw, verse 1, that the grace of God is the motivating source of all genuine generosity. And then in verse 2 we saw that challenging circumstances like severe afflictions and deep poverty do not have to be barriers to Christian generosity, because genuine generosity is not a matter of the amount of money given but of the driving disposition of the heart that is born out of supernatural joy in Christ.

And then in verses 3 to 5 we saw the detailed character of Christian giving enumerated into six features: Christians are to give proportionally, sacrificially, voluntarily, gratefully, mutuality—that is to say, conscious of the fellowship giving engenders among the people of God; and, finally, Christians are to give whole-heartedly—devoting our entire selves, and not just our money, first to the Lord and then to the service of His church.

Then last week, we moved on from the example of the Macedonians' generosity, to the beginning of Paul's instructions to the Corinthian church to bring their initial desires and preparations to completion in their participation of this offering. Verse 6 is a transition verse, where Paul lets the Corinthians know that Titus—who had had such success ministering among them in the delivering of the severe letter and witnessing their heartfelt repentance—that Titus would come to them again and help administrate the offering.

After that transition, we saw that Paul gave three characteristics of genuine Christian generosity. In verse 7, we learned that generosity is a grace to be pursued—that if we are going to have a balanced, well-rounded spiritual maturity, generosity will be among the Christian graces that we must seek after and cultivate in our lives. We cannot rest on the laurels of other spiritual gifts and

graces, but as we abound in everything, we must also press on to abound in this grace also. In verse 8, we found that generosity is the proof of genuine love, and therefore that it cannot be compelled with commands, but must be the voluntary overflow of a willing heart. It is the demonstration of a heart filled with the driving disposition to benefit one's brothers and sisters, and gives an occasion to prove that the love we say we have in our heart is the real thing—to put our money where our mouth is, if you will.

And then finally, in verse 9, we saw that generosity is driven by Gospel grace, preeminently displayed by the grace of the self-imposed poverty of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is to say, that although in His pre-existent, eternal glory and deity He was in possession of spiritual riches whose wealth words are unable to capture, He nevertheless voluntarily and sacrificially renounced those riches, and embraced the poverty of life and death as a human being, precisely so that we who were destitute of God's favor and blessing could be enriched with the very righteousness of God Himself! And we celebrated the richness of Christ in His eternal, pre-existent divine majesty—the richness of His divine being, being God of very God Himself; the richness of His divine possessions, being the rightful owner of everything under heaven; and of His divine relations, enjoying the ineffable delights of intra-Trinitarian communion. And then we bowed in wonder, as we considered that God the Son did not slavishly cling to His riches, but instead for our sake became poor, embracing the poverty of self-sacrifice, of death, and even of the divine curse.

And we asked, if we know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ—if we are beneficiaries of a Gospel accomplished by self-imposed poverty, the richest of the rich made the poorest of the poor—how could we ever fail to abound in the grace of generosity? How could we ever resist our own self-imposed poverty and close our hearts to the needs of our brothers and sisters? How could we not bend the grace of God that we have received in Christ out to others just as we have received it? How could we be anything but lavishly generous?

Well, this morning we continue our study of Paul's instructions to the Corinthians—in this theology of Christian giving. And we continue to make it our aim to uncover **principles for our Christian giving** that inform how we think about money, about generosity, and about faithful stewardship of the financial resources that God has blessed us with. And in verses 10 to 15, we find **three more of those principles**.

### **I. The Relationship between Desire and Doing (vv. 10–11a)**

The **first principle** to which I want to draw your attention is **the relationship between desire and doing** in the Christian life. **The relationship between desire and doing**. And we see that illustrated in verses 10 and 11. Paul says, “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.”

Now, the first part of verse 10 is closely linked with verse 8, where Paul indicates what his approach is not: he is not speaking this as a command. After holding forth the example of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in verse 9, he returns in verse 10 to say what his approach *is*. It is not to speak as a command, but to “give my opinion in this matter.” And we spoke briefly last week about how, elsewhere in his letters, Paul contrasts the issuing of apostolic commands with the giving of his sanctified opinion. In 1 Corinthians 7, as he addresses whether unmarried people ought to seek marriage or remain unmarried. And he says in 1 Corinthians 7:25, “I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.” He says, “I have no command from Christ on this matter. The Lord Jesus has not given me any revelation or instruction that demands His people to marry or to remain unmarried. But, I give my opinion. Your conscience is not bound to my opinion; *I* am not your Lord. But I give my opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.” In other words, “Though it is just my opinion, I think I’m a trustworthy source.” Later on in verse 40, he says, “It’s only my opinion,” but “I think that I also have the Spirit of God.” Again, in other words: I’m not binding your conscience to an apostolic command; it’s only my opinion. But it’s my opinion as one in whom the Spirit of God dwells. It’s what I believe is a sanctified opinion.” And so this is, as one commentator put it, “serious apostolic counsel under the direction of the Holy Spirit” (Guthrie, 407).

And in this case, it is Paul’s sanctified opinion that it only works to the Corinthians’ advantage—it is only in their best interest—to bring to completion what they were willing to begin in the first place. Paul says, You were the first to begin a year ago. You were first church to indicate that you would participate in the offering! And not only that, you were the first church to make preparations to give; you had already begun setting aside money week by week, as I directed you in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4. But more even than that, you were the first not only to *do* this, but also to *desire* to do it! You weren’t just grinning and bearing it! You weren’t just muscling up obedience to do something that you had no heart to do! You desired it! There was readiness, verse 11, eagerness to desire as well as to do! I’ve boasted about that readiness to the Macedonians, chapter 9 verse 2, and your zeal has stirred up most of them! Their generosity, that I’ve held up to you as an example worthy to be imitated, was stirred up by your zeal! Now Corinthians, you who have made such a wonderful beginning in this matter, it’s my sanctified opinion that it’s only to your great advantage that you bring to completion what you have begun! To have made such an illustrious beginning in this collection, only to fail to follow it through to completion, would be a horrible shame to you—a shameful exposure of inconsistency. It would, chapter 9 verse 3, make my boasting about you empty. Don’t do that. “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.”

And, as I say in the main point, we learn something here of **the relationship between desire and doing**, especially with respect to giving, but which can legitimately be applied to all other areas of Christian obedience. In the first place, you see that Paul commends them not only for making a beginning in the collection—not only beginning to follow his directives in 1 Corinthians 16 to put aside and save a little bit of money each week as the Lord prospers them—but also for their desire to participate in this offering. He says they “were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it.” Now, what that distinction teaches us is that Paul placed a premium not only on *doing* the right thing, but on *desiring* to do the right thing. Can you see that? The fact that he says, “You didn’t only do it, you desired to do it as well!” means that he regards the kind of giving that springs from a genuine desire to give as superior to the kind of giving that does not.

This flies in the face of a commonly-accepted understanding of the Christian life in which obedience is evacuated of all affectional components, and conceived as nothing more than the bending of one’s will to conform to external duties. I call it “Nike Sanctification.” You know: Just do it. “You just do your duty and your feelings will follow.” But genuine sanctification does not simply entail bringing our outward behavior into conformity to an external standard. It is a fundamentally supernatural work of God internally in the heart of man. That’s why, in that classic text on sanctification, Philippians 2:12–13, Paul does not just say that God is at work in us to work for His good pleasure, but He is at work in us *both* to will *and* to work for His good pleasure. And so genuine holiness is both internal and external. We want to have sanctified affections as well as sanctified actions—because God commands us not only to *behave* righteously; He also commands us to *be* holy.

Hypocrites—people with no genuine love for God or His people—can perform external duties that they have no heart to do by the exertion of their willpower. But that’s not what holiness is. Christ is not interested in praise from the lips while the heart is far from Him, Matthew 15:7–8. And God does not simply command us to carry out a series of external duties. He also commands us to be in a particular frame of heart as we do those external duties. We could call them “internal duties.” In Micah 6:8, we’re commanded not only to *do* justly, but also to *love* mercy. In 1 Peter 5:2, pastors are commanded not merely to shepherd the flock of God, but to shepherd the flock of God *willingly* and *eagerly* (1 Pet 5:2). And here in 2 Corinthians, with respect to giving, we’re told in chapter 9 verse 7 that “Each one must do just as he has *purposed in his heart*, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a *cheerful* giver.” So if God loves a cheerful giver, and you give begrudgingly without cheerfulness, have you obeyed? Well, you’ve done your external duty to give, but you have not done your internal duty to give cheerfully.

So it’s so important that we see—both with respect to giving, and with respect to all other aspects of Christian obedience—that sanctification doesn’t consist merely in external behaviors. It’s a such a change in the state of the heart that the newborn soul loves what God loves and

hates what God hates, and acts in accordance with that regenerated heart and those renewed desires. God cares not only about our *doing*, but also our *desiring* to do. He sees the heart. And He commands us to be in such a frame of heart as not only to perform righteousness, but to love righteousness. Not only to give, but to desire to give—to give cheerfully. So we learn that holy desires are necessary to genuine obedience. Mere external obedience is incomplete without internal obedience.

But though holy desires are necessary to obedience, they are not sufficient for obedience. In addition to holy affections, there must be the holy actions that flow *from* those affections. Paul praises them for their sanctified desires in verse 10. But then he says in verse 11: “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.” It’s not sufficient to merely want to do the right thing; you must actually do it! Just as the doing is incomplete without the desire, so also is the desire incomplete without the doing. It’s not enough to feel sympathy. It’s not enough to hear of a brother or sister’s financial need and feel genuine sorrow at the trial they’re facing, and to offer to pray for them, and to wish them well. Paul knows that all the well-wishes in the world aren’t going to put food in the bellies and clothes on the backs of the poor saints in Jerusalem. No, the love we say we feel in our hearts must be carried through to completion by the work of our hands. And if we refuse to carry through our desires into actions, we cast doubt upon whether such desires really do have a home in our heart.

As commentator Philip Hughes says, “The doing of a thing is only proper proof and expression of the willingness to do it” (Hughes, 304–05). And so the Apostle John says in 1 John 3:18: “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” Let us not merely talk about doing good to our brethren, let us actually do it. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, verse 9, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes—not: He merely *desired* to become poor! Not: He genuinely pitied your poverty, and really wished you well that you would somehow be able to overcome your state of destitution. No! Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He *actually* became poor! He actually made the sacrificial decision to lay aside the glories of heaven—to impoverish Himself of His riches—and to become poor in order to make you rich! He put His hand where His heart was. And we know what was in His heart by observing what He did with His hand.

So you also, GraceLife—you who know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ—don’t content yourselves with the notion that you love your brothers and sisters in Christ because, when you see them in need, you feel sympathy for them. No, carry your desire to help out into actually helping them. Let the driving disposition of generosity that is in your heart be known by what comes through your hands.

So you see **the relationship between desire and doing**. You ought not to content yourself with heartlessly performing external duties—giving out of your abundance without actually engaging your heart. You must *desire* the good you would do. But neither ought you to content yourself with having all the good desires in the world. You must *do* what you desire and actually carry that desire through to completion.

## II. The Principle of Proportionality (vv. 11b–12)

Well, in addition to the relationship between desire and doing, we find a **second principle** for giving in verses 11 and 12. And that is, number two, **the principle of proportionality**. Middle of verse 11: “. . . so there may be also the completion of it by your ability.” 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.”

And we saw **this principle of proportionality** before, as Paul spoke with reference to the Macedonians in verse 3. There, he said, “For I testify that they gave *according to their ability*.” And now, turning from describing the example of the Macedonians to giving directives to be implemented by the Corinthians, he hold out the same standard: you are to give *by your ability*, according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have. It’s the same standard that he had mentioned to them in 1 Corinthians 16, when he gave instructions in the previous year as to how they were to prepare for the offering. 1 Corinthians 16:2: “On the first day of every week, each one of you is to put aside and save, *as he may prosper*.”

And what we see here is that though Paul has held up the Macedonians as an example of generosity to be imitated, he is not calling the Corinthians to give as the Macedonians did—that is, beyond their ability. Verse 3 says the Macedonians gave according to their ability, and beyond their ability. And though he would love if the Corinthians found the same driving disposition of generosity to be at home in their heart, such that they would think strategically about how they might give beyond their ability, here he assures them that, while they are to give generously and sacrificially, the standard that he imposes upon them is not beyond what they are able to give. God is not expecting that they give what they don’t have—that they go into debt in order to contribute to the offering. No, if the readiness is present, their giving is acceptable to God according to the resources that by the providence of God a person *has*, not according to what providence has not seen fit to give him.

And one of the implications of **the principle of proportional giving** is that no one is excluded from being able to participate in meeting the needs of the saints. There may have been some in the church who had the desire to contribute, but were ashamed that they could only contribute a small amount, given their present financial circumstances. Here were their friends setting aside fifty, one hundred dollars a week, but when the plate came to them they only had a few dollars to

contribute. They couldn't keep up with the double- and triple-digit offerings, and perhaps thought it was inappropriate only to give comparatively little. Well, the good news about **the principle of proportional giving** is that no one is excluded from the blessing of contributing simply because they don't have a lot to contribute! Paul says, "Don't think, because you see your brethren putting in the 50-dollar bill, that 50-dollar bills are all that is acceptable! No, if it is in your heart to bless your brethren—if the readiness is present—your gifts are acceptable to God according to what you have, not according to some fixed amount in comparison to your neighbors!"

You remember the story of the poor widow in Mark 12. Mark 12:41: "And Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent." Now, if the Corinthians heard that, they may have been embarrassed for the poor widow, who didn't have hardly anything to contribute even in the face of the fat cats donating their large sums. But Jesus doesn't demean her for not giving what she doesn't have. Mark 12:43. "Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, 'Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.'" The widow's offering was more acceptable to God than the large sums given by the rich people, because while they gave out of their abundance, she gave sacrificially. Her two cents was worth more in God's eyes than the large bills the others had put in, because Christian giving is to be **proportional**, according to what one has.

So Calvin writes, "Some . . . on the ground that they cannot give much, make use of this as a pretext for entire exemption. 'Could I give so small a sum?' All excuses of this nature Paul removes, when he commands every one to contribute according to the measure of his ability. He adds, also, the reason: that God looks to the heart—not to what is given. For when he says that readiness of mind is acceptable to God, according to the individual's ability, his meaning is this—'If from slender resources you present some small sum, your disposition is not less esteemed in the sight of God than in the case of a rich man's giving a large sum from his abundance. For the disposition is not estimated according to what you have not, that is, God does by no means require of you, that you should contribute more than thy resources allow.' In this way none are excused; for the rich, on the one hand, owe to God a larger offering, and the poor, on the other hand, ought not to be ashamed of their slender resources" (292–93).

If you have more, you ought to give more! If you have less, it's no shame to give less. What matters most is not the amount that comes through your hands, but what is in your heart. And if your heart is captured by the driving disposition of generosity, worked by the grace of God and by an unfettered joy in Christ, that gracious disposition of generosity will find a way to express



itself, even if it must give a lesser amount than those who, in the providence of God, are more well-off.

And in our exposition of verse 3, we spoke about what our ability to give actually is. If my giving is to be measured by the standard of what I have, how do I determine what it is that I actually have? Because before it ever comes into my hands, there are several people that have a claim upon my money such that it cannot properly be called mine. In the first place, there is giving to God a portion of what He has blessed us with—and offering of our first fruits to Him as an act of worship, and as a support of the work of His Gospel, starting from the home-base of our own local church. The New Testament indicates that the pastors of a church be supported financially by the people—1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Corinthians 9:14—so that before you have any money to spend on anything else, your first obligation is to give to the Lord from your first fruits to sustain the ministry of the Gospel through your local church.

Second, we are to pay our taxes. In Luke chapter 20, when the Lord was asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman government—which was no bastion of justice and faithfulness—He responded by saying, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” In Romans 13, when Paul is discussing the Christian’s relationship to government, he says in verse 7, “Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due.” Before the money I earn has even come into my hands, I have an obligation to pay my taxes, such that the money I pay in taxes cannot properly be regarded as a part of what I have, with respect to the kind of freewill giving outlined in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

Third, we are also obligated to provide for ourselves and for those for whom we are responsible. In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul says, “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” And he identifies those basic necessities of life for which we are responsible in 1 Timothy 6:7 and 8, where he says, We’ve “brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food and covering, with these we shall be content.” Food to keep us strong to serve the Lord, clothing and shelter to protect us from the elements. Those members of our own household have a claim on our resources, so that I cannot be expected to neglect them in order to give to some sort of collection. Jesus commented explicitly on such a case, where he chastises the Pharisees in Mark 7:11: “But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition.”

So what this means is, we cannot stop our regular giving to the church, we cannot refuse to pay taxes, we cannot refuse to take care of legitimately dependent family members, all under the pretense of giving to the needs of the saints! God says, “The church, the government, and the family already have claims on a portion of your earnings, so that they cannot be considered to be

part of what Paul means by ‘what a person has.’” But after those commitments are fulfilled, what is left over is what we have—our net spendable income, if you will. And that is to be the measure of our generosity.

And that means, friends, that you have to ask yourselves whether you are seriously, before God, evaluating whether you are being a good steward of what you have—whether your ability can be increased if you were to alter the manner in which you use it. Are there luxuries that you can do without, so that you can contribute to supplying Bibles to our Local Outreach Department, so that we can distribute those to the people whom we’re evangelizing? Can you do without your daily Starbucks order, so that you can help get a missionary out to the field? Can you sacrifice the weekly trip to the restaurant so that that family in your Bible study can afford the groceries they need this month? You are to give **proportionally**, according to your ability. And if the grace of God has worked in you that spirit of generosity, you will be strategic in how you might be increasing your ability, so as to invest in the kingdom of God.

### **III. The Principle of Equality (vv. 13–15)**

Well, then, we come to a **third principle** for Christian giving that Paul outlines in these six verses. We are not only to pay heed to the relationship between desire and doing, and to the principle of proportionality. There is, also, **number three, the principle of equality**. And we find this in verses 13 to 15: “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.’”

Paul begins here by clarifying one of his aims in the whole matter of the collection. It’s as if he anticipates objections from those in the congregation—something along the lines of, “Why should we become poor so that the saints in Jerusalem might become rich? Paul, is this a Jewish thing you’ve got going on here? We Gentile churches ought to support the ‘Mother Church’? If we give sacrificially, the Jerusalem church will be supported, but *we’ll* be poor!” And Paul says, “No, my intention isn’t that you should ease the burden of the saints in Jerusalem by becoming poor yourselves. My goal isn’t to make the Jerusalem church rich and the Corinthian church poor. That would only be to reverse the roles but retain the same problem. Then I’d have to take up a collection among them for your relief. And we’d go around in circles. No, this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality. My goal here is equality.”

And equality, here, is defined not as some sort of communism, or socialism—not the confiscation and forced redistribution of property, so as to obliterate all distinctions between those who might be called rich and those who might be called poor. No, the Scripture is clear that everyone’s property is his own to do with it what he pleases, and that one’s economic

standing is a function of his diligence and willingness to work. Proverbs 10:4: “Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, But the hand of the diligent makes rich.” Proverbs 14:23: “In all labor there is profit, But mere talk leads only to poverty.” In 2 Thessalonians 3:10, Paul says, “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.” Paul says, “Are there busybodies among you? Those who are lazy, who don’t want to work, but want to knock on your door and say, ‘Hey, you’ve got a full table and I’ve got nothing! Paul says there is to be equality! Fix me a plate!’” Paul says, “In the name of Christ, you slam the door in his face! If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat.”

So this notion of equality that Paul aims at here is not what you hear the political left calling for today: the redistribution of wealth so as to eliminate “income inequality.” No. Interestingly, the only other place in the New Testament in which this word for “equality” is used is in Colossians 4:1, where Paul writes to masters of slaves, “Masters, grant to your slaves justice and *fairness*.” Obviously that cannot mean the obliteration of all social and economic differences, otherwise he would have told them to release all slaves and welcome them all as dependent members of their households! Instead, the term refers to *fairness*, as the NAS translates it, to kind and just treatment, not taking advantage.

You say, “Well what about the early church? Didn’t they all sell all their property and live in a Christian commune?” No, the fellowship of the early church was not forced redistribution of wealth engineered by the apostles. It was the voluntary sale of one’s own goods to meet the basic needs of the people. Acts 4:32 says, “No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” Notice, not: “No one had anything of his own,” but rather, “No one *said* that his belongings were his own.” No one insisted upon clinging to their own property, but they *voluntarily* surrendered it, verse 35, “as any had *need*.” In Acts 5 we read about Ananias, who was reproved not for keeping back the proceeds from the sale of his land, but keeping it for himself while at the same time wanting to have the *reputation* of having given it to the church. Peter says, “While it remained unsold, did it not remain *your own*? And after it was sold, was it not *under your control*?” Ananias’s property was his own before he decided to sell it, and the money he got after selling it was his own to do with what he pleased. This is not forced redistribution of wealth! All Christian giving—from the very beginning of the church—is entirely *voluntary*. It may be that we have a duty to be generous, but no one has a claim that anyone else’s property belongs to them.

So rather than a communistic or socialistic principle, Paul’s meaning of equality refers to the equal relief from genuine need. Look at verse 14 again: “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.” It is the relief of genuine *need* at which this equality aims. That our brothers and sisters in Christ not be deprived of those basic necessities of life—of food and clothing and shelter—while we have a surplus of resources at our disposal. Paul is saying, “Dear Corinthians, at the present time, God has so providentially ordered your circumstances that after your putting food on your tables, clothes on your backs, and roofs over your heads, you have an abundance, a surplus left over. And yet by that same order of providence, your brethren in Jerusalem do not have the resources to provide those basic necessities of life. So at this present time, let your abundance be a supply for their need, so that if there was ever a time that you found yourselves destitute, unable to provide for yourselves food and covering, others in the body of Christ would then give of their surplus, so as to provide for your genuine need.” And so Calvin offers a helpful summary: “There is not enjoined upon us an equality of such a kind as to make it unlawful for the rich to live in any degree of greater elegance than the poor; but an equality is to be observed thus far—that no one is to be allowed to starve, and no one is to hoard his abundance at the expense of defrauding others” (297).

And then Paul illustrates this principle by quoting Exodus 16:18, as he appeals to the historical record of the Lord’s provision of the manna in the wilderness. Turn back to Exodus 16. God had just redeemed the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt by miraculously leading them to walk through the Red Sea and drowning the Egyptian army behind them. And what amounts to only several days later, the people were grumbling against Moses and Aaron because there was no food in the wilderness. And in response to their grumbling, the Lord provides bread from heaven, called manna. In verse 14 Moses calls it “a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground,” and in verse 31 he says, “It was like coriander seed, white, and its taste was like wafers with honey.”

Now in verse 16 he reports the Lord’s instructions: “This is what Yahweh has commanded, ‘Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent.’ The sons of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack; every man gathered as much as he should eat. Moses said to them, ‘Let no man leave any of it until morning.’ But they did not listen to Moses, and some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul; and Moses was angry with them. They gathered it morning by morning, every man as much as he should eat; but when the sun grew hot, it would melt.” So, each day the members of each tent were to gather the manna for the needs of their families. And it says some gathered much and some little. Maybe some of the families had a few active, athletic young men who were able to gather more than others who were older and not as spry as they used to be. But even though they may have gathered different amounts, all of what everyone gathered was put together and measured out equally, an omer for each person. And if anyone attempted to hoard the manna—if they tried to save it up so they could have a greater portion the next day, it spoiled and became rotten.

And what does this teach us? That we, as members of the body of Christ's Church, are, as one commentator said, "all inmates of the same spiritual tent, travelers together through the wilderness of this world to the same heavenly Canaan" (Wordsworth, as in Hughes, 308). And that God is the one who supplies us with the "manna" of financial provision for our daily necessities. And though we might each gather smaller or larger portions of God's provision, none of us is to so hoard that provision such that we might collect an abundance while our brothers and sisters lack the basic necessities of life. If we do that, we'll find that our hoarded riches will be accursed of God—that they'll spoil while in our storehouses—and become serviceable neither to ourselves nor to others. No, when in the providence of God we are able to feed and clothe ourselves and those for whom we're responsible, we are to regard our surplus not as disposable income to be spent on our excessive tastes or fruitless entertainment, but rather as the provision of God to meet the genuine needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Later on in 2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul promises that God will multiply the "seed" of the generous. Those who give generously will be given *to* generously by God. But notice the way he says it, 2 Corinthians 9:10: "Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness." Seed is for sowing, not for hoarding! God will honor your generosity with increased provision, but not increased provision for you to heap up and keep to yourself! He will multiply your seed for more sowing! In Ephesians 4:28, Paul tells us why we must work hard. He says, "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that" he can save a lot of money and have a healthy bank account when he retires. No! "He must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that *he will have something to share* with one who has need."

### **Conclusion**

GraceLife, what are the needs that your brothers and sisters are experiencing? Who is there in your Bible study who has needs that, in the providence of God, at the present time, they are unable to meet? What Gospel labors—whether by missionaries or ministries of your own local church—could be furthered by your sacrificial giving? Dear friends, just as you abound in everything—eminent in spiritual gifts and mature in spiritual graces—see that you abound in this grace also. You who 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—you who are beneficiaries of that radical generosity of Christ: bend out the grace that has been bestowed upon you unto the service of others, and in so doing magnify the grace of Gospel generosity.