

The Extreme Generosity of the Macedonians

2 Corinthians 8:1–6
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The next two chapters of 2 Corinthians direct our attention to a particular part of Paul's ministry, viz., finances. Some might consider this subject rather mundane or unimportant, especially in our day, in which a growing Gnosticism insists we focus on purely spiritual things, not material things.

But the apostle didn't regard finances as either mundane or unimportant. In fact, it's amazing how much time he spent addressing it — not just in 2 Corinthians but throughout the whole New Testament. His concern comes across clearly in today's text. But he never talked about money. Money is just time. If a person makes \$20 an hour, \$100 represents five hours of his life. But for Paul it was *the grace of God*, i.e., God's gift, as we see in verse 1. He spoke of this grace so highly that it seems he regarded generosity as one of the chief manifestations of God's work in the lives of his people.

In particular, today's text concerns a collection Paul requested for the church in Jerusalem. The churches in Macedonia had already contributed generously, even beyond their ability, but the church in Corinth was lagging behind. Paul wanted to fix this.

The Collection

To appreciate what Paul wrote in chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians, we have to know why this special collection was needed and how it was done.

It began with a powerful earthquake that struck the ancient world on March 23, AD 37, during the reign of Caligula. A few years later, a second earthquake hit during the reign of Claudius, causing crop failure and a great famine. The prophet Agabus foretold this in Acts 11:28. The church in Antioch responded by sending relief to the church at Jerusalem, which suffered more than most. Twelve years later, the needs of the Jerusalem church were still great enough that Paul was calling upon churches all over the empire to help. He spent another eight years traveling thousands of miles in four Roman provinces to solicit funds. He had at least ten men helping him. Titus was one of them. This may explain how Titus first became acquainted with him. Altogether, Paul and his colleagues collected an enormous sum of money — so much that Portius Festus, the Roman governor, thought he should get some of it for himself. Acts 24:26 says, *He hoped also that money should have been*

given him of Paul, that he might loose him: wherefore he sent for him the oftener, and communed with him.

The giving of one church to another in this way became a main focus of Paul's work from the start. James, Peter and John had encouraged this, though he was already inclined to do it anyway. Galatians 2:10 says, *Only they would that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward [or zealous] to do.* Paul exhorted the church at Corinth to make collections for the saints a regular part of its ministry. He wrote, *Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come (1 Cor. 16:1-2).* He cited the example of the churches of Macedonia again in his letter to the Romans to encourage the saints there to follow suit. Romans 15:26-27 says, *For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things.*

However, the giving of the Corinthians didn't go as planned. They had pledged to take an offering for Jerusalem but hadn't done so. Paul reminded them about this in the verses following today's text. He wrote, *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. 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 (vv. 10-11).* The Corinthians needed to do what they promised, as Psalm 15 says, *blessed is he that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not (v. 4).* Interestingly, although they hadn't fulfilled their commitment, the fact that they had pledged to help inspired other churches to do so, specifically the churches in Galatia, Macedonia and Rome.

Paul also gave very precise instructions for collecting and sending this money. In 1 Corinthians 16, he instructed the church to take its collection on the first day of the week, i.e., when God's people naturally gathered for worship and fellowship. Then he added that the church was also to appoint men to carry its offering to Jerusalem. Other churches had done this already. Titus and other brothers represented the church in Corinth. Second Corinthians 8:23 says, *Whether any do enquire of Titus, he is my partner and fellowhelper concerning you: or our brethren be enquired of, they are the messengers of the churches, and the glory of Christ.* Perhaps the representatives of other churches are the men named as Paul's companions in Acts 20:4, viz., *Sopater of Berea; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timotheus; and of Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus.*

The Macedonian Example

Now, with this background information in our minds, let's move on to today's text.

The first verse of 2 Corinthians 8 might not make much sense at first, but a modern update to the translation would read something like this: “Moreover, brethren, we want to make known to you the grace of God given to the churches of Macedonia.” On his second missionary journey, Paul established three congregations in Macedonia — Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. You can read about these works in the sixteenth and seventeenth chapters of Acts. From there, Paul traveled south into another region known as Achaia, which is where Corinth was located. Acts 18 describes his ministry there. In our text, Paul cited the Macedonian churches as examples for the church at Corinth to follow regarding giving.

This was especially important because of the tremendous economic disparity between these two regions and their churches. Macedonia was poor. In verse 2, Paul spoke of its *deep poverty*. But Achaia in general, and Corinth in particular, were much better situated. But who was giving — the richer Corinthians or the poorer Macedonians? The answer is obvious. Verse 2 says, *How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.*

What an incredible verse! The Macedonians were experiencing *a great trial of affliction*. They had problems of their own, one of which, perhaps the biggest one of all, was their lack of funds. Yet, they gave with joy, but not just joy. Paul wrote that their giving abounded through *the abundance of their joy*. They were ecstatic to give, even though they had little to spare. They found greater joy in helping others than satisfying their own needs.

How many people can say this? How many of us can say it? Yet, it should be our goal. A 10-percent tithe shouldn't be the end of our giving, but the beginning of it.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul noted the sacrificial nature of the church's giving. He wrote, *But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God* (ch. 4:18). This church's giving was as pleasing to God, perhaps even more pleasing, than the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

According to verse 3, the Macedonian churches outdid themselves. They didn't give according to their ability only, but beyond it. They wanted to do this. *They were willing of themselves* to help. They had determined to exercise this grace of God — the grace of giving — in their lives and service of Jesus Christ.

How far did the Macedonians take this? Look at verse 4: *Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.* Apparently, Paul, knowing the poverty of the Macedonian churches and their desire to give far beyond their means, tried to dampen their enthusiasm. But they wouldn't hear it. They *prayed* to the apostles to let them help. The word translated *prayed* isn't the usual word for prayer, nor is it the usual word for asking or requesting. It means to beg. A demon used it in Luke 8:28 when he begged Jesus not to torment him. Likewise, the Macedonians begged Paul to let them be part of his effort to help the Jerusalem church. They begged him *with much entreaty*. For them, giving was a privilege. It was *the fellowship of the ministering to the saints*.

Paul cited the generosity of the Macedonian churches, especially the church at Philippi, several times in his writings. Later in 2 Corinthians, he wrote, *And when I was present with you, and wanted [or lacked], I was chargeable to no man: for that which was lacking to me the brethren which came from Macedonia supplied: and in all things I have kept myself from being burdensome unto you, and so will I keep myself* (ch. 11:9). He also commended the Philippians directly. He acknowledged in his letter to the Philippians that Epaphroditus had brought their gift (Phil. 2:25) and that they helped him when no one else did (ch. 4:15).

It's one thing to give. Sometimes we give joyously; sometimes grudgingly, especially when we, like the Macedonians, have little to begin with. Paul understood this. In the next chapter, he wrote, *Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver* (ch. 9:7). But the Macedonians went far beyond mere joyous giving. They begged Paul to let them give, and then they gave and gave and gave.

If you're wondering what would move people to give so generously when they have nothing to give, look at what Paul wrote in verse 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.* The Macedonians were generous because they had given themselves to the Lord before they opened their wallets to Paul and the saints in Jerusalem. It's not just that God owned their money, which he did because everything belongs to him (including the cattle on a thousand hills), but he owned them, too. Their lives and everything they had were in his hands, and they trusted his promise to satisfy all their needs.

Jesus spoke about this in the Sermon on the Mount when he said, *But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth* (Matt. 6:3). The picture here is taking out your wallet, turning your head, and dumping money into the coffer. You give whatever your hand happens to pull out, though you can't see it. He didn't mean that we should be irresponsible but that we should be exceedingly generous. And the fact that one part of our body doesn't know what another part's doing emphasizes secrecy. Our generosity is not for public display. In the very next

verse, Jesus said, *That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.*

Many rich men give to various causes, expecting to have a hospital wing or an art museum named after them or someone they love. Sometimes, recognition is unavoidable. When Mary anointed Jesus for burial, he said, *Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached throughout the whole world, this also that she hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her* (Mark 14:9). But we shouldn't give to be recognized. We should do it for the joy of giving, i.e., the joy of serving the Lord through our giving. We do it for the delight of helping our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

The last verse of our text sheds additional light on Titus and his ministry. Earlier, I mentioned Titus represented the church at Corinth regarding the collection for the church at Jerusalem. Verse 6 suggests that Titus may have spearheaded the church's pledge. Maybe that's why the Corinthians chose him to oversee the offering.

Because Titus had already proven himself effective in this role, Paul chose to use him again. He sent him to Corinth not just to find out how the church was doing, but to encourage it to follow through with its giving commitment. He was helpful, but more needed to be done.

Note also that just as Paul began talking about the collection for Jerusalem is the grace of God in verse 1, so he returned to it at the end of verse 6. Titus was to finish among the Corinthians *the same grace*.

May we all follow through with our financial obligations, particularly regarding the church, to the glory of God in the satisfying of the needs of others! It really is God's grace at work in our lives. May our hearts be filled with joy as we continue to learn to give generously and joyously.

Paul has a lot more to say about giving, but it'll have to wait until next year. Amen.