

Generosity in giving
2 Corinthians 8-9

These two chapters on generosity in giving are often taken in isolation. We need to read these two chapters in the Corinthian context, and especially in this last letter, after all the problems that Paul had tried to resolve. Paul did not treat each of the issues raised in isolation, but at every juncture, pointed to the Christ on the cross. In this last letter, he has dealt with the presence of the Spirit in engraving the truth of God's word in the hearts of God's people. Reconciliation is the work of God and this leads to a godly repentance. This is the central theme in this last letter and it is only as the Spirit has done His work in the heart that one can respond in generosity to others. We need to keep this in mind as we read these two chapters. Paul is not writing this as a command to the Corinthian Christians to entice or demand them to give, but rather stating this as a relational response to the Spirit's work.

The background to this section was the poverty in Judea. There was a famine in Judea and Paul was trying get a collection from the Gentile churches to help the believers there. Surely, this must be the expression of a reconciled relationship.

¹ We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.

The churches of Macedonia, the region north of Greece, comprised the churches at Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Paul knew them well and had ministered to them. There was opposition to these churches, yet they weathered those trials. Even in their poverty they had given generously. They had received the grace of God and responded with joy and generosity, even beyond their means. They did this not because of compulsion, but on their own accord. And not only this, they begged 'us earnestly for the favour of taking part in the relief of the saints' (8:4). They did not need to be coerced into giving or needed any stimulus in order to give like our modern-day marketing gurus. Verse 4 should really read like this. '... begging us earnestly for the privilege (*charis*) of the fellowship (*koinonia*) in the service (*diakonia*) of the saints'. They had received the grace of God and responded in grace to others, serving one another. In so doing they were expressing the fellowship they had in the body of Christ.

However, we cannot start with this end point and then expect all to respond similarly. The grace of God in the hearts of the people has to happen first. As a result of this they responded to the Lord, '... they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us' (8:5). The interpersonal relationship is not a direct one as we have said previously. We do not seek a direct response from those to whom we minister. Rather, we entrust them to the Spirit who will engrave the word of God in their hearts.

All doctrines need to be understood in the context of the covenant, God's covenant or promise to His people. We need to keep in focus what God has done and all processes are understood in that context. What we are seeing here is the response of the Macedonian churches to the grace of God, and not a response from the prodding of men. The primary response is to God and only secondarily, 'by the will of God' (8:5), to others. In giving, what we should say is that it is from God through us. It is what the heart feels as a result of the relationship with God.

⁷ But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. ⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. ¹⁰ And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹ So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. ¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴ your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

The Corinthian Christians had been much blessed with gifts from God in their ministry as we know from 1 Corinthians. When Paul wrote, ‘see that you excel in this act of grace also’ (8:7), he was referring to the giving from the church. However, we should not read that as a command, but rather Paul was expressing a desire to see that they respond in that way. He further elaborated that he did not say that as a command (8:8). That response should be the expression of the love in their hearts, a love that was kindled through Paul’s ministry there – ‘in our love for you’ (8:7). When Paul was addressing the sexual abstinence in 1 Corinthians 7, he acknowledged that he had no direct command from the Lord. Sure, it is not a direct commandment, but what Paul is using here is a form of the ‘If-then’ argument. The *if* portion is the antecedent; the *then* portion is the consequent. The antecedent *if* is the love that they have received. The consequent *then* is the giving. So, the giving shows the genuineness of the love in them.

Paul then went on to cite the example of Christ. ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (8:9) does not refer to some favour we received, but rather to the action of Christ in coming to earth and going through the suffering on our behalf. ‘He became poor’ (8:9) cannot be understood as economic poverty. If that is so, then we must all be wealthy because Paul followed this up by saying, ‘so that you by his poverty might become rich’. So, it is not economics that Paul is referring to here, but that Christ ‘emptied himself’ (Phil. 2:7) so that we might share in His glory. That is the ‘riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints’ (Eph. 1:18).

The giving from the Corinthian church had started a year before this. Paul was probably referring to 1 Cor. 16 when they had a collection. Paul was urging them to continue to do so. Paul as always did not want to focus simply on their action, but on the response of the heart. That is why he added the phrase, ‘but also the desire to do it’ (8:10). He repeated this in the next verse, ‘your readiness in desiring it’. If that is so then it must be expressed in practical ways, another form of the ‘If-then’ argument. In their giving it is not the amount that matters, but ‘according to what a person has’ (8:12). Jesus made a similar comment with regards to the widow’s mite.

Again, we see that Paul was not locked into some form of outcome. Our expression in love is a response to the abundance that God has given to us and that come from the heart. So, Paul continues in v. 16.

¹⁶ But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. ¹⁷ For he not only accepted our appeal, but being himself very earnest he is going to you of his own accord. ¹⁸ With him we are sending the brother who is famous among all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. ¹⁹ And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us, for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our good will. ²⁰ We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, ²¹ for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of man. ²² And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you. ²³ As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker for your benefit. And as for our brothers, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. ²⁴ So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to these men.

Titus was not simply carrying out a task set by Paul. He had within him the same heart-felt concern for the Corinthian Christians as Paul. Just as Paul began by pointing out the work of the Spirit on human hearts, he maintained the same theme throughout his letter. The Christian response is a response of the heart, not simply a task response. Titus went to Corinth ‘of his own accord’ (8:17). Paul did not have a strategic plan to move his fellow ministers to handle the situation. They sensed the situation and responded in the things they did, as ‘the love of Christ constrained them’.

Two other brothers were mentioned but not named (8:18, 22). They too showed earnestness in the preaching of the gospel and in many matters. The movement in the region was to handle the ‘generous gift that is being administered by us’ (8:20). This gift collected by the gentile churches was for the impoverished Jewish Christians. This is the reflection of the reconciliation that has taken place in Christ. What they were doing is to the glory of Christ, the proof of the love within them.

2 Corinthians 9

9 Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints ² for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year. And your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³ But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴ Otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—for being so confident. ⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for the gift you have promised, so that it may be ready as a willing gift, not as an exaction.

It seems that this is a long section devoted to giving. However, we need to know that Paul was quite determined to put to rest two things. One is that giving must originate from a heart that is touched by the Spirit, and not being compelled or manipulated externally. Two, he wanted to avoid the idea of giving in order to receive.

So, Paul continued saying that it is superfluous to tell them about the ministry to the saints. He stated that he knows about their readiness to give. If we have been following Paul's reasoning with the 'if-then' argument, then it is superfluous for him to say further. The reconciliation that has taken place following the godly grief would restore the relationship with God and with the community in which they were in. The support for one another would naturally follow. This should be a 'willing gift' (9:5), and not given out of compulsion. Notice that Paul logically affirmed that what is a work on the heart will result in a response from the heart. He laboured this point in the following section.

⁶ The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written,

“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.” (Quote from Ps. 112:9)

'God loves a cheerful giver' (9:7) is often used as an exhortation to the church to give. However, this cannot happen unless there is firstly a work on the heart by the Spirit. Paul's reference to the sowing and reaping is a truism from nature. However, I don't think he is using this to lever the Corinthians to give as he follows this with an assertion that one should give 'as he has decided in his heart' (9:7). It is all a response to grace (9:8). I have no doubt that Paul is rephrasing what was given by Moses in Deuteronomy. Notice the references here to the heart.

⁷ “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, ⁸ but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. ⁹ Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin. ¹⁰ You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’ (Deut. 15:7–11)

Israel is a community raised up by God. They were given land for a living. Yet, as the Lord has given to them freely, so they should not harden their heart (Deut. 15:7) and they should give to their brothers freely (Deut. 15:10). This generosity is honouring to God. Whatever one might make of the law in Deuteronomy, we need to see it as teaching on grace and the response of the heart to grace. Paul is affirming this from Deuteronomy in his letter.

The 'all sufficiency' in 9:8 is not self-sufficiency but the sufficiency coming to us as a result of the grace of God. And it is this sufficiency from God that enables us to 'abound in every good work'. As I have said previously, all giving whether it be monetary or otherwise, should be seen as from the Lord through us. Paul reaffirms this in this last section.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. ¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. ¹³ By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, ¹⁴ while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!

Paul again uses an analogy from agriculture. Beyond what we do is the work of God. While we plant and water, it is God who gives the harvest. Interestingly Paul uses the phrase, ‘harvest of your righteousness’ (9:10). It is not easy to know what Paul means here. Some have inferred that it is the fruits of what we have done, which is what a harvest brings about. I don’t think that is what Paul meant. We need to understand righteousness as a relational notion. That being so, then what this phrase means is that we harvest the abundance of our reconciled relationship with God and with one another. In other words, it is coming into the fullness of our relationship in the family of God.

In giving, it is in this sense that God will enrich us (9:11). Some people stop there and turn that into a goal in giving, i.e. giving in order to receive. In the context of what we have said regarding the ‘harvest of righteousness’, that cannot be what Paul is saying because Paul did not stop there. He continues, ‘to be generous in every way’ (9:11). The purpose of giving is to bless others, the recipient and not the giver. In giving our lives are enriched relationally and that propels us to continue giving and if not even more.

We should not see giving as merely ‘supplying the needs of the saints’ (9:12), but more importantly beyond that to see the ‘thanksgiving to God’. It is a service to God as Paul calls it ‘the ministry of this service’. We should see this ministry of giving as a process originating from God to us, then through us as we give. As this has come from God then our giving to others is also to God (a response to the work of God in us). So, finally what has come from God is now returned to God ‘in many thanksgivings’ (9:12). In this way of understanding giving, then there is no room to conceive of anything material returning to us.

So, Paul concludes this section with these words, ‘By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others, while they long for you and pray for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you’ (9:13-14). This is the intensification of our relationship in Christ. It is because of this that Paul bursts out with this exclamation, ‘Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift’.