

2 Corinthians 8:1-15
Exodus 16
Psalm 72

“The Grace of Giving”

May 22, 2016

Exodus 16:15 is quoted in 2 Corinthians 8:15.

“whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

It’s an interesting choice of passage,
since Paul has been dealing with the matter of conflict
between himself and the Corinthians.
And Exodus 16 is about a conflict
between Moses and Aaron and the congregation of Israel!

But Exodus 16 also makes it clear that the people of God are not supposed to *hoard wealth*.
Manna from heaven was the “daily bread” of the wilderness generation.
For 40 years they ate bread from heaven.
But if they tried to hoard it, it bred worms and stank.
God was teaching his people to *trust him* –
he will provide all that you need.
How will he provide?
Generally speaking, he will use ordinary means.
Most of the time, you work hard, you get a paycheck – that’s how God provides.

And then sometimes disaster strikes –
and you need help.
So your family steps in to help –
and in Jesus, you’ve got a very, very large family!

Our Psalm of response – Psalm 72 –
speaks of this family through the person of the King – the son of David.
The Davidic King was called to make sure that God’s people were properly cared for.
He was called to make sure that the poor were not trampled on.
Indeed, the King would feed thousands every day out of his abundance.

When the King does justice and establishes equity
then no one is allowed to hoard wealth at the expense of others!

And if the *King* does this –
then all the nobles and leaders of Israel should follow his example.

Sing Psalm 72
Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Giving relief to the saints – sending money to helpless Christians around the world –
is an act of grace.

The key word in chapter 8 is “grace” (used in verse 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 16, 19, and again in 9:8, 14, 15).
It is translated “grace” in verse 1 – “the grace of God” in the churches of Macedonia;
who begged “for the favor [or grace] of taking part in the relief of the saints” (v4)
“this act of grace” (v6 and v7)
which is compared to the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” in v9.

I want this to sink in.

What Paul is saying is that the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ
should form the pattern for our life together
in such a way that our economic life – our financial priorities –
should be re-oriented by grace.

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That grace should characterize the way you spend money.

And while we should do good to all people,
we should *especially* care for the saints.

If Jesus has brought us into one new family,
then we should treat the whole family of Jesus as *our* family.

This is why Paul addresses the Corinthians as *brothers* in verse 1.
Paul is urging us to think of the whole Christian family as *our family* –
and thus, we should care for our family appropriately.

1. The Relief of the Saints – What Sort of Giving Is in View?

Paul doesn’t explain the context here –

because the Corinthians have been discussing this since last year (9:2).

But Paul is not talking about the “regular” giving of the Corinthians.

We know from 1 Corinthians 9 that Paul encouraged the Corinthians
to provide well for their pastors.

But that’s not his point here.

Paul is not even talking about the regular gifts for the poor.

Rather, Paul is talking about what we would call a “special offering” for the saints in Jerusalem.

We know from the book of Acts that there was a famine in Judea around this time.

The famine was so severe that the resources of the churches in Judea were not sufficient.

So the churches all over the world sent aid –

over a period of at least a couple years.

And this pattern of thinking about the whole church as our family
continued to influence Christian economic practice in the early church.

In the Roman world, you were supposed to use wealth to show generosity to your city –
and to your fellow citizens (not the poor). [Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 528]

Hospitality was to be shown to people of equal social status –
not to the poor.

But in the Christian church, giving was an act of grace –
an act that connected you to *the* act of grace – the incarnation of the Word –
and his atoning sacrifice.
And Jesus' gift was made at great cost to himself!

It was that understanding that drove much of the early donations of land to the church.
During the middle ages around 1/3 of the land of Europe (1/3 of the wealth of Europe)
was given to churches and monasteries.

In many ways, that was a good thing.
Churches and monasteries were the places where the “relief of the saints” took place!

The problem was that monasteries often became corrupt –
and even more fundamentally, the purpose of giving shifted
from giving wealth for the relief of the saints,
to an attempt to save yourself by giving. [Brown, 530]
In the 16th century, the reformed churches rejected the monastic model –
but the reformers generally tried to convert monastic property
into a system of hospitals and poor relief,
returning to a focus on the relief of the saints.

But the Christian gospel has fundamentally re-oriented
the economic priorities of every people to whom it has come.

Think about the economic implications of this:
total strangers in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor
are taking up generous collections
and sending a large sum of money to total strangers in Jerusalem.

Given how few people were Christians in the 1st century,
it may not have had a huge economic impact yet.
But as the church grew and spread,
the result would be profound.

And in verses 1-5, Paul uses the example of the churches in Macedonia
to try to stimulate the Corinthian church to follow that same pattern:

2. Overflowing in the Grace of Giving (v1-7)

a. The Churches in Macedonia Have Overflowed in the *Grace* of Giving (v1-5)

We want you to know, brothers,^[a] 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.

Paul starts by pointing to the Macedonian churches.
George Guthrie challenges us here:

“we might ask whether the grace of God is manifested among us in a way
that bears witness to those outside of our immediate location,
denomination, or cultural context.

Might we be used as an edifying example to those not in our immediate circles?” (393)

The churches in Macedonia were characterized by “extreme poverty.”
And yet they were also characterized by an “abundance of joy.”

And this spills over in extravagant generosity.

It’s *not* that they have a lot of money, so they will be charitable to those poor people over there.
No, Paul highlights the importance of *grace*.

They were in the midst of their own severe test of affliction.
But *that’s how God works*.

Paul has been using the theme of affliction all throughout the letter.
The pattern of Christian ministry is the cross –
affliction and death is the only way to joy and life.

This is the pattern that Christ set forth on the cross.

Therefore, it is the pattern that Paul and his traveling presbytery has experienced –
and therefore it is the pattern that the Macedonian and Corinthian churches
should expect.

And when Paul sees one part of the body functioning properly,
he eagerly points to that and celebrates it!

“See!
The gospel is working properly!
Look at that!
Imitate that!”

Given how often things do *not* work properly,
it is worth celebrating when something *does*!

(read:)

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^[b] 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.*

Paul is walking a fine line –
because there is a delicate balance that needs to be maintained:
the relief of the saints – helping our fellow Christians who are in need –
is *not* optional.

And yet, it is also not something that one Christian can impose on another.

It is something they did “of their own accord.”

Paul is very clear: it is the will of God.

But Paul is equally clear that *he* cannot determine *how much* each person should give. He says that the Macedonians gave “according to their means” and even “beyond their means.”

What does that mean?

It means that when your family needs help, you help them.

Jesus has called you to be part of a new family.

Even as God called Abraham to leave his father’s house and go to the Promised Land, so now you have been called as one new family in Jesus.

And the Macedonians get it!

Indeed Paul says that they begged us earnestly for the favor (for the *grace*) of taking part in the relief of the saints.

The Macedonians were *beggars*.

The word used in verse 4 “begging us earnestly” would ordinarily be used of “beggars” asking for money.

But the Macedonians – the poverty-stricken Macedonians – rather than asking for a handout themselves,

were begging for the *grace* of taking part in the relief of the saints.

They understood that giving to the needy is an act of *grace*.

This is where it’s important to pay attention to the context.

Where is the money going?

The Christians in Judea.

Who is doing the asking?

Paul.

We’re not talking about people going around asking for handouts.

When things are working properly (and I’ll grant that things often *don’t* work properly) the relief of the saints happens when *other people* notice the needs.

The International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) has a disaster relief function.

If there is a major disaster in one country,

the churches in other countries can contact the ICRC church – and their deacons can communicate the needs,

which then get reported around the world.

Sometimes we get third-world pastors coming on fund raising trips to the US.

I’m not going to say that that is always wrong –

but I will say that that is *not* what Paul is doing.

Paul is *not* saying “I need help, you should help me.”

Paul is saying, “They need help, and *we* should help them.”

I want you to think about that.

Because in our day, we don't do very well at this!
And I want to challenge you to do better!

Do you know a Christian brother or sister who needs help?

What are you doing to help?

Are you just waiting for them to ask?

Or are you taking point in leading the charge to help them?

Because notice that Paul himself is not the *point person* for this:

b. See That You Overflow as Well (v6-7)

⁶ *Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace.*

Paul and his traveling presbytery recognized that Titus had a zeal for this work.

So the work of raising funds among the Corinthians was *Titus'* project.

And so they urged to complete *this act of grace* among the Corinthians.

That's a great phrase!

“This act of grace.”

The *pre-eminent* act of grace will be described a couple verses later
as the incarnation and sacrifice of Jesus.

But our lives are also supposed to be characterized by *acts of grace*.

As Paul says in verse 7:

⁷ *But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you^[c]—see that you excel in this act of grace also.*

The Corinthians already “excel” (or overflow) in various gifts:

in faith, in word, in knowledge, in all earnestness (or enthusiasm).

And Paul adds a note of endearment –

they also overflow in “our love for you.”

But Paul exhorts them to “overflow in this act of grace also.”

Again, we're not talking about the *regular* giving for the ministry of the church.

Paul seems to assume that all that is happening.

He wants us to overflow – to abound – in the act of grace

found in providing relief to needy saints.

3. Earnestness, Readiness, and Fairness: the Principles of Giving (v8-15)

Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett have written a helpful book,

“When Helping Hurts” –

which provides useful principles.

But all other principles need to be governed and guided by the principles that Paul gives us here!
Earnestness, readiness, and fairness.

First, *earnestness* – as exemplified by Jesus himself:

a. The Earnestness of Christ – Enriching Others by Poverty (v8-10)

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.*

Paul recognizes that he may sound a little “over the top” in his tone,
so he makes clear that he is not *commanding* the Corinthians to give.

He is using the Macedonians as an example of earnestness
to challenge the Corinthians to prove the genuineness of their love!
If you love Jesus,
then you will love those who belong to Jesus!

And so Paul once again uses the pattern that we have seen repeatedly in 2 Corinthians –
Christ not only died *for you* –
he also died as an example that you should follow.

Because we *participate* in Christ
therefore we are called to imitate him.

*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.*

And this calls forth echoes of what Paul had said in 6:10 about himself and his colleagues –
“as poor, yet making many rich.”

And we are reminded of the pattern of Christian ministry:
from Christ to us to you.

Paul has been talking for five chapters about the nature and character
of a sincere, genuine Christian ministry.

Now he says that this *act of grace* of giving to others who are in need
is the way that the Corinthians can demonstrate that they too
are genuine, sincere Christians.

Christian giving – *particularly* Christian giving for the poor and needy –
should be characterized by the same earnestness that was found in Jesus –
the same *grace* –
that though he was rich –
though he was in the form of God,

he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped,
but humbled himself – made himself nothing –
and took the form of a servant –
the Creator became a creature;
the one who gave the Law came under his own Law!
He through whom all things were made
entered his own creation by the power of the Holy Spirit
in the womb of the virgin Mary.

John Chrysostom put it well:

“If you do not believe that poverty is productive of great wealth,
think of the case of Jesus and you will be persuaded otherwise.
For if he had not become poor, you would not have become rich.” (in Guthrie, 406)

So the first principle is that you should give like Jesus gave.
(And to remind us again of the recipients,)
we are talking about giving to relieve needy Christians.
Yes, your giving will tend to impoverish yourself.
But that’s okay!
That’s what Jesus did!

If you have been united to Jesus –
if you now partake of his resurrection life –
then the principles that characterized Jesus should now characterize you!
So give of yourself the way that Jesus gave.

But you can’t give what you don’t have!
So Paul urges us to give according to what you have –
not what you don’t have!

b. Each According to What He Has – the Readiness to Give (v11-12)

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.

In verses 10-11 Paul reflects on the eagerness
with which the Corinthians started the project a year ago.
You desired to do it – now see to it that you bring it to completion.

The point is that you should give in proportion to what you have.
Paul does not specify *what* proportion,
because the proportion will change according to circumstances.
Some people have very little.
So they can only afford to give a very small proportion of what they have.
Other people have a whole lot.

So they can afford to give a higher proportion of what they have.

You may be wondering – “what about tithing?”

In a couple weeks, when we get to chapter 9, we’ll come back to that question.
I will simply say here that Paul’s attitude toward giving
suggests that the relationship between Old and New Testament giving
is analogous to the difference between Old and New Testament worship.
The real temple – the final sacrifice – the true place of worship – is Jesus himself.
In the same way the true pattern of giving *is Jesus*.

Tithes, firstfruits, gleanings, offerings – all these OT financial practices
are types and shadows.

As such, they are *useful* in helping us think about finances –
but the apostles do not apply them rigidly to the church.
Rather, they show how *Christ* is the fulfillment of the whole law –
and therefore, Christ is the pattern of NT giving.

So don’t worry about what you can’t do – think about what you can do.

Maybe you don’t have much money.

That’s fine.

If the readiness is there, whatever you can give
is acceptable according to what a you *have*.

But also, you can give your time.

You can give with your house (inviting people in) –
you can give with your car (giving people rides).

My mother died 11 years ago this month.

11 years ago today I was sitting in a Baptist church in North Carolina
at an impromptu memorial service for my mom,
where I heard a remarkable story.

You see, all her life, my mother had grand and glorious dreams of what she would do *if...*
She was always thinking of what she would do *if circumstances were different*.

But at the age of 62 she found herself divorced twice,
with no money, no career, and practically speaking, no real hope of a future.
She moved from California to North Carolina to go to college.
And the first year she was there, she wondered “what happened to southern hospitality?”
No one ever invited her over.
She had a 500 sq ft apartment – jammed with all her earthly possessions.

But she finally decided that she couldn’t wait any longer.
So one-by-one she invited every single woman in her church over for tea.
And one-by-one at that memorial service,
woman after woman stood up to say that her life was changed
as she sat in this little tiny apartment with my mother –

a woman who had nothing.
And then each woman went home to her vast, empty house –
and they wondered, “what are we doing with our houses?”
How can we serve Jesus better with the gifts he has given us?

Don't wait until the last year of your life!
Start now – with whatever you have!
As Paul says, it's not the amount that matters –
It's the readiness – the willingness – and carrying that through –
to finish what you start.

Yes, it will mean that you will not have as much money (or time) to spend on yourself.
But why did you think that spending it on yourself was such a good idea?
Jesus spent himself on you –
and so you are called to spend yourself in the service of Christ's people.

When you hear that, you may start feeling tired!
Why does it always have to be me?!
Why do I always have to spend on others?!

Paul hears that groan – and responds in verses 13-14:

c. As a Matter of Fairness – What God Teaches Through Manna (v13-15)
*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.*

“Fairness”
We tend to think that “fairness” has to do with keeping what is mine.
The word translated “fairness” can also be translated “equality.”

The point is *not* that everyone should have the exact same amount of money.
The equality here – the fairness –
is that over time it will all even out.
At the present time, you have an abundance.
Therefore your abundance should supply their need.
The day will come when you are in need.
At that time their abundance will supply your need.

What does Paul mean by “abundance” or “overflow”?
We live in a day when we spend extravagant sums of money
on things that are *not* necessary.

I would encourage you to pay attention to your expenditures over the next month.
How much do you spend on necessities?
(*necessary* food – not snacks and desserts and “extras” –

necessary clothing – namely, you don't have *any* shoes –
and other things that are *truly* necessities!)

Then how much do you spend on other things – things that are *not* necessary?
Entertainment, toys, conveniences and luxuries that you just “like.”
Extra clothing – fancy things that you don't really *need*.

I'm serious.

I want you to write this down – keep track of this for a whole month!

And at the same time, I want you to keep track of how much you spend this month
on helping fellow Christians who are in need.

(This includes what you spend on feeding them, clothing them,
as well as sending them things.

The monthly diaconal offering can be included here.)

If you are the sort of person who keeps a budget,

I would encourage you to do your best to track this on a regular basis!

If you are like me, this exercise will scare you.

Because if *my spending habits* reflect what I think about grace?

Then I need to work on how I think about *the act of grace!*

And it's here that Paul uses an OT economic principle to illustrate his point:

¹⁵ *As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”*

The manna in the wilderness shows us a picture
of what God's principles of fairness are all about.

In the OT God divided the land equally among the 12 tribes of Israel –
and decreed that every 50 years the land was to return to the original owners.
That meant that you should not be trying to enlarge *your piece* of the economic pie
at the expense of others!

Now, Paul applies that principle to the church:

You should be using the overflow of your wealth to sustain and relieve others.

You may have gathered much – that's great! –
but you should have nothing left over.

You may have gathered little – that's okay –
but you should have no lack.

Now, it's important to recognize that Paul is not saying that it's okay to be lazy!

This is the same apostle who says that if a man will not work,
he should not eat (2 Thess 3:10).

The point is that when disaster strikes,
your brothers and sisters should not be left helpless!

And I should say that you have responded admirably time and again!
Whenever you have heard of Christians in need, you have overflowed with grace!

When disaster struck our family – and Ginger nearly died – you gave yourselves first to the Lord,
and then by the will of God to us!

When the earthquake struck our brethren in New Zealand – you gave generously.

When Jonathan and Amy Callis were afflicted in triplicate – you shared again and again!

So we are called to overflow in the grace of giving –
because that is what Jesus did for us:

“though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor,
so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

May that same mind be found in us!