

Grace of Giving
Lamentations 3: 22-26 and 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Requests for financial support. They seems to be everywhere-television, newspapers, social media, phone calls, radio, text messages, church and all other means of communication. There are so many worthy causes, but, most of us cannot give enough to meet every need. Does that mean we go the opposite direction and give nothing? Does it mean that pastors avoid talking about giving because it produces stress in some? No, to both questions. But, it does mean that we approach giving by building on its foundation, and well, the importance of giving is mentioned over 1,500 times in scripture. So, the Word of the Lord is where we begin. And today, we start with 2 Corinthians 8, verses 1-7 which point to giving as the essence of Christianity.

There is no other way to start this conversation than this: God so loved the world that God gave his only son to death that we might have eternal life. Jesus gave his life the forgiveness of our sins that our relationship with our Creator could be healed and saved. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to be an ever-present companion with us in the journey we call life.

Life freely given. Love freely given. Forgiveness freely given. Salvation freely given. The joy of the presence of our Triune God, freely given, for all times. In this giving, there is grace: love undeserved, love unearned, unasked-for love. And this grace of giving begins and ends with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is asked of us between beginning and ending? Out of gratitude, we are asked to share the love of God with others by giving our lives in service as Jesus modeled, commanded and commissioned us to do. If you hear nothing else, please embrace this truth of God's Word: God is a giver and wants us to be givers also.

To help us embrace this, we are going to look at Paul's letter to the Corinthians for a bit of history and context. The early followers of Jesus, living in Jerusalem, were going through tough financial times. Famine had created hungry bellies, and not just empty tummies, but also economic hardships. Food trade was affected by the famine, which led to loss of jobs, and even worse, the elimination of any product to even use in bartering. Food, a staple of life was missing, and it was having a chain reaction. Poverty reared its ugly head, and with it, a soul-searching question particularly for Christians: What obligation do we have to the Jerusalem believers,

people we do not even know, in their time of need? It is a soul-searching question that we are still asking ourselves every day. And honestly, this is not a question with a one-and-done answer.

It is a question that keeps bringing us back to face this truth: God is a giver and wants us to be givers also. Giving, like running our race of faith asks of us perseverance. And that is where we find ourselves today with Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

For almost ten years, Paul took up a collection, an offering, for those in need in Jerusalem. But, instead of a fiery preacher speech requesting money, Paul goes into teacher mode. He shares first how the Macedonian churches were examples of givers. His point though, was not that they were run-of-the-mill givers, they gave sacrificially. He speaks of how the Macedonian churches are overflowing in grace. Did you catch that, not money, but grace. People in the churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea had no more financial resources than their brothers and sisters down the road, and yet, they gave in spite of their own financial struggles and it is result of that gracious generosity you see Christians willing to level the playing field so that all may have something.

Then Paul takes it up a notch more. The un-asked-for, unearned love of people to people comes not out of some rainy-day fund or a sense of obligation; they give, Paul says, with enthusiasm. They want to do as Jesus taught them to do, give from a grateful heart because of what has already been received...salvation, the gift that brings us home to God. In giving beyond even Paul's expectations, he says that, out of their poverty, generosity overflowed.

In the world's eyes, this makes no sense. Why would people in financial straits give money to others in financial despair? Is that not a simple canceling out? But these Christians were not looking through the eyes of the world. They were not out to make sense of the world's logic, they were serious about living as Jesus. Showing love. Finding joy in helping others. Giving from the heart of the Lord living in them. Paul's point is that this grace of giving can happen before it makes sense or even before there is the ability to give. The grace of giving is not what we do, it is what God can do through us. To have the heart of a giver is a gracious gift from God. One we can accept. One we can refuse. One gift asks of us to give as the world gives. The other gift asks of us to give as our Triune God has already given to us. One gift can bring temporary joy. To give from the generous heart of the Lord within us, that promises eternal joy.

Paul reminds his readers that with no coercion, no sales pitch, no sob stories, Christians, collectively as churches, not only gave on their own, they urgently pleaded to help their brothers and sisters in Christ. It was for them a privilege to share because they had themselves experienced God's giving in Jesus and salvation was not the kind of generous gift one keeps to self. And, they believed that despite their own poverty, their involvement in this collection would bring them closer into the common faith and union that believers were meant to have as part of Christ's church.

Time and again, scripture points to God's concern for the attitude of the giver rather than the amount of the gift. In the story we know so well as the Widow's Mite, she gave all she could from the heart, and that caught Jesus' attention. That same attitude is evident in the Macedonia believers. They did not set out to create a monetary target, they committed themselves to the work and will of God first. The financial support for that work came as a result of that trust, not the other way around. Not only was money given, amounts that exceeded their human expectations, in letting go of that pocket calculator, Paul says, they discovered something the grace in giving. And in that grace, they discovered the joy of giving, even when their life circumstances would have them believe giving was risky business. It was and is through the grace and the joy of giving that the Holy Spirit works through us to bring that ultimate gift, salvation.

One of the commentaries mentioned Exodus 36: 6 that speaks to the building of the Tabernacle. It seems that Moses was very effective in his pleas for offerings. So generous were the people that they had to be restrained from giving. Seriously! So, when was the last time you heard someone stand up in church and say, Please stop giving. We have exceeded our offering expectations. If you continue to give, we will have to restrain you!

What a great story. And we could end it there. Money given. Tabernacle built. People joyful. But, the work of the Lord is not a project by project proposal where all we do is gear up for the next ticket item. The work of the Lord is hard work; it is on-going work. And that is why Paul issues this challenge of sorts to the Corinthians. Give to those in need. But more importantly, understand why you are giving.

It is that understanding that takes us back to the truth. God gave first, and out of gratitude we are called to make our giving an extension of the grace of God at work in our hearts. The grace of giving is a reflection of our trust in what God already

has planned and ordained and our willingness, our enthusiasm, our commitment to partner with God, not because of what we can or cannot do, but because with God, nothing is impossible.

Paul challenges us who say the Lord has changed our lives for the better, to let the Lord change the way we give in thankful return. The more God's grace, that undeserved, unearned love, takes hold in our lives, the more faith we will have; the better our witness will be; we will be more passionate and loving, and according to verse 7, we will excel more in the grace of giving. All of this because of God's giving, our receiving and God's sharing in and through us, the joy of salvation in word and deed.

You and I know all to well what happens when we hit a bump in the road of life and that which we were once eager to do is now like dead weight around our necks. We are living in the bumps right now that could pull us away from our call as Christians and disciples

Paul reminds us that the Corinthian church had been first out of the starting block to give heart and resource for the sake of the gospel. But, something happened, and that white-hot desire to be generous suddenly hit a cooling spot. Interest was lost. Bodies were tired. Minds were weary. Differences sparked division. Those are human things, Paul reminds us, not God things. The work of the Lord is not and should not be dependent upon our whimsical ways.

God, in Jesus Christ made a forever commitment to us. We have been called to do likewise, to keep our end of the promise. We are to finish what we started. And folks, what we have started is this: the sharing of God's love in Jesus Christ, that has no financial constraints and no time limits. It is the mission to which we have been called from the rising of our days to the resting of our nights-every single day. Thanks be to God for the grace of giving first. May the Spirit gift us with the joy as we also excel in the grace of giving. Amen