

THIS ACT OF GRACE

- Do you know the grace of Jesus Christ?

Key verse: 2 Co 8:9, "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."

I want to start the message with two questions. Can you turn to your neighbors and ask, "Why do you give an offering?" Please add one more question, "Are you rich?"

At each Sunday service, we spend several minutes to give an offering. Why do you give an offering? Is it simply because there is an offering time and everyone around you is giving? Because you set up a monthly auto-pay to Chicago UBF and you forgot about it? To reduce your tax? Or just to thank God. Maybe all of the above.

In today's passage, we will find two upside-down examples of giving. I believe they can change our perspective in many ways. Importantly, we will find the most profound motivation for our giving, which is the giving of Jesus Christ.

Part 1. Giving that hurts

Here is the context of today's passage (map). The churches of Macedonia were in three cities – Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea – as we studied in Acts 16-17. Corinth was in a neighboring region called Achaia, just south of Macedonia. And Paul was collecting relief offerings among the Gentile churches for the Jerusalem church, which was experiencing severe economic troubles due to persecution (Ro15:25–27). In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul already addressed the matter of relief offering and gave an instruction on how to collect it (1 Co 16:1-2). Today's passage is his follow up.

Let's read verses 1-2. Paul starts re-discussing the relief work, highlighting the Macedonian churches' giving example, which inspired him. Here, what sounds puzzling or illogical is: the Macedonian believers gave generously while they themselves were living in extreme poverty. Recently, we have felt somewhat impoverished due to inflation. But their poverty may have been many times worse than our experiences. Still, they were willing to give even beyond their means, Paul says in verses 3-4. Their giving percentages on their incomes were too high that it hurt them. The absolute amount of their giving was probably not huge considering their poverty. But their spirit of giving was richer than any others. Would you be willing to give like them if you were living in the same condition?

Then where is their giving spirit coming from? Let's go back to verse 1. Paul refers to *the grace of God* given to the churches of Macedonia. It turns out their sacrifice did not originate from some Macedonian giving culture. God's grace was the secret sauce. In other

words, *its cause was divine*. Here, the word “grace” is the key for our study today, and a deeper understanding of this word will enhance our study. The original Greek word behind “grace” is *charis*, which appears in ten different verses in chapters 8-9. *Charis* can mean multiple things, but the following three meanings permeate today’s passage. (1) God’s mercy and favor toward undeserved humanity or sinners (e.g., “only by His grace, I was saved”), (2) God’s empowering in the believers’ lives (e.g., “God gave me grace to endure during my final exam”), and (3) generous giving or gift.

Then how was *charis*, God’s favor maybe in their context, given to the Macedonian churches? Acts 16 reveals how God’s grace reached them. Apostle Paul, during his second missionary journey, first wanted to go to Bithynia with the gospel, not to Macedonia. But the Holy Spirit did not let that happen, and soon Paul saw the famous Macedonian man’s vision – “come over to Macedonia and help us” (Act 16:9). They were in dire need of God’s help. So, Paul’s itinerary was quickly shifted to Macedonia. This is how Macedonia became *the first recipients of the gospel in Europe*. Knowing this, they must have appreciated God’s grace upon them with overflowing joy. And they were so willing to sacrifice for the Jerusalem church who sent the gospel through Paul. In verse 5, Paul says they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to him. Out of deep gratitude, they offered their hearts and lives first to the Lord. Then their relief offering simply became *a genuine expression of their hearts*.

Now, what about the Corinthian believers? Let’s read verses 6-8. Inspired by the Macedonians’ example, Paul asks the Corinthian church to follow through on their existing commitment to the relief offering. Here, importantly, he does not “command” the Corinthian church to offer. Paul does not want to simply reproduce the giving behavior of the Macedonians among the Corinthians. Of course, on one hand, Paul does urge them to excel in giving (act of grace; *charis*) and fulfill their commitment for their own spiritual benefit. On the other hand, though, he wants their giving to be genuine, not a task done reluctantly or under compulsion (9:7). Such demanded giving is like paying taxes, which is mandatory not voluntary. Here is the bottom line: *only a deep experience of the grace of Jesus can cause a genuine giving according to Paul*. Do you sometimes feel obligated or pressured to give? Or do you give because you received the grace of Jesus?

Part 2. Do you know the grace of Jesus Christ?

Let’s read verse 9, which is our key verse. Although the Macedonian churches’ example is inspiring, Paul seems to think it is not enough to change the Corinthian believers’ hearts. So, he goes straight to *the ultimate example or model of giving*, which is our Lord Jesus Christ. Here Paul is banking on the fact that the Corinthian church already knew what Jesus had done for them. Indeed, if the Corinthian believers had not accepted Jesus, he wouldn’t discuss the relief work at all. If he did, their giving might become something called *philanthropy*, which is giving caused by human love (Greek: “philos” human love + “anthropos” mankind). The church relief in this passage is not a philanthropy. It is because the love in verse 8 is “agape” in Greek, which is God’s love. Therefore, the Corinthians’ giving should be motivated by God’s giving in His love. Indeed, *Jesus’ giving should be the primary model that inspires all Christian giving*.

Then, how does Paul describe Jesus' grace? He says, "...though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." First, let's not forget - *because Jesus was rich, He could give*. Was He a billionaire? Not even close. Then, how rich was He? According to the Bible, before the world existed, Jesus lived in heaven as the Divine Son enjoying heavenly glory and fellowship with the Father (Jn 1:1-3; Jn 17:5). Then He created the universe, which means He is the Owner of the entire material world. Just based on these, I am convinced He was rich! But then *He became poor intentionally and willingly* - not under compulsion of the Father God. Specifically, He was born in a manger in Bethlehem as a poor carpenter's son (Lk 2:7). Then He lived among the lowly and marginalized people. If He had chosen the palace in Jerusalem as His birthplace, how many lowly people could have approached Him? Finally, He decided to give His own life on the cross to pay the debt of our sins. You might think the Macedonians' giving was radical. What about this sacrifice of Jesus? It is beyond radical, and it defies all human logic.

Then why did Jesus choose to become poor? *It was to make us rich*. What an exchange! Jesus' sacrifice resulted in our salvation with a rich benefit package. Then what's in it? Let's just list a few (Eph 1:3-7; Re 21:10,11). (1) We were spiritually bankrupt due to our sins that we could not repay. But on the cross, He paid it all and now we are righteous before God's eyes. Hallelujah! (2) God the Father adopts sinners like us as His children. So, in Christ, we are included in His royal family in the heavenly kingdom. If your self-esteem is low today, just think about this. (3) The eternal resurrection life in heaven is waiting for us. You senior citizens, do you have health issues? You younger folks, waiting to buy a house but mortgage rates are still too high? I pray God may help you overcome all these challenges. But here is the best news. You will have an eternal resurrection body and a heavenly mansion. Praise Jesus!

Here I want to take a moment to internalize this key verse together - with two questions. *Do you know this grace of Jesus? Do you feel rich because of His giving?* If not, please listen carefully to these words of Jesus. He said in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:3), "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The prerequisite of experiencing His rich blessings is *poverty in one's soul*. Only those who see their dire spiritual needs will receive the blessings of His kingdom. Do you think the Macedonian believers were poor in spirit? I believe so. In an interesting way, their material poverty might have helped them to be humble and deeply accept the riches of Christ. *The poverty in our heart leads to the riches in Christ*. To illustrate, I want to plug in a very different church example, which is not in today's passage. Was there a church around Corinth that was not poor in spirit? The church in Laodicea (east of Corinth) was materially rich, but unfortunately, that led them to pride, not humility – the exact opposite of the Macedonian churches. So, in Rev 3, Jesus rebukes this church, "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,' not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see." If the Macedonian churches are an inspiring example, the Laodicean church is a warning example. They felt so rich in their wealth that they declared they needed nothing – although they went bankrupt spiritually. Maybe they had once known His grace before, but now they did not seem to remember it. So,

Jesus urged them to repent and come to Him to receive all His spiritual benefits. What about us? What about our church? Are we poor in spirit to receive from Him?

Part 3. Paul's giving principles

Paul finishes this section of the letter with a few important guardrails of giving. First, in verses 10-11, Paul asks them again to complete their relief work they began. Words are often cheap but actions speak louder. Our words should be *matched by our actions*. What we believe is ultimately found, not in what we say, but in what we do.

Second, in verse 12, Paul believes a Christian should give out of what he or she has. When the Macedonian churches gave beyond their means, it was not what Paul expected. Generally speaking, he judges the giver based on the willing heart and *giving within his or her financial capacity*. If you have to go bankrupt to give, should you do that?

Third, in verses 13-15, Paul shows how churches can help each other in God's economy. But, in helping, he clarifies the purpose of the collection is not burdening one church to make it easy for another. This is consistent with 2 The 3:10-12, where he says the believers should be financially responsible. That's why this collection is called *relief* - not wealth redistribution. Here Paul is simply requesting some material support out of Corinthians' wealth for the Jewish believers, who probably could not even get a job during persecution. The Jewish believers already shared the gospel with them, and now it's time for the Gentile believers to share. In the future, who knows, the exact opposite might happen.

Personal story

Before concluding, I am supposed to share my story. About 11 years ago, God revealed to me the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ when I tried to get my first job. I had a job interview with Intel in 2015 around Portland, OR. After the interview, I had extra time and a rental car. So, I decided to drive out to a nice neighborhood to see how rich Intel people live. Looking at several nice houses there, I thought to myself, "Ah, if I move here and buy one of these nice houses, then Grace will be happy." Then, I encountered someone. He knocked on the door, not of my rental car, but of my heart. He was the Holy Spirit. He invaded my rental car and revealed to me the life of the Son of God here on earth. Jesus didn't go to the place of wealth, honor, and comfort. Jesus went to the lowly manger, to the lowly people, and finally to the cross – the place of suffering and death. I deeply repented of my sin that sought my own glory and wealth. And I worshiped the One who is the richest but chose to become poor for me. After meeting this Jesus, I had no desire to stay there, so I left the neighborhood.

Almost 11 years have passed since that day, and now I feel that my life needs a renewal. Today, I have various responsibilities as a family man – including a mortgage to pay and five mouths to feed. The older kids will probably go to college within several years, which comes with a price tag – called tuition. Dealing with these, I sensed that there had been little room in my heart for God and His suffering people – just like the thorny ground in the parable of Sower

(Mt 13). There was no time to be poor in spirit, and I could not see how rich I was in Jesus. As I was praying about these things, I was also struck by one thought, "How sad will it be if I help my kids to be materially wealthy but that wealth ends up leading them to spiritual poverty?" The true wealth I should give my children is not money or good college but Christ. So, I chose my new year's key verse as Eph 1:3 on the spiritual blessings in Christ. I pray that I may re-discovered them this year.

Conclusion

Let me conclude the message. *Do you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ?* Your answer to this question will help you to answer the earlier questions: "*Are you rich? Why do you give?*" Our God is the God of rich grace, who gave His one and only Son on the cross to make us rich. And we give because He gave.