

Excelling in the grace of giving (2 Corinthians 8:1-16)

1) Context of 2 Corinthians

I. Geography and demographic

Corinth is situated Greece. The area was divided into two provinces, Macedonia to the North and Achaea to the South. In the North, Thessalonica was the capital and Corinth held that title in the South. Corinth was situated 60 miles west of Athens and the two cities were separated by a thin strip of land, called the Isthmus of Corinth. Corinth was essentially a port city. It was cosmopolitan in nature with travelers, sailors, business men passing through the city. Athens to the East was the cultural and academic centre, where as Corinth was the commercial centre of Greece. There was quite a rivalry between the two cities. We could draw a comparison with Glasgow and Edinburgh. Glasgow, on the whole a working class, port city and Edinburgh, known as the cultural and academic centre of Scotland. Separated by about the same distance as Corinth and Athens. In general the folks in Corinth weren't badly off financially, especially in comparison with their counterparts in Macedonia.

II. Letters to the church in Corinth

1 Corinthians was actually the second letter Paul wrote to the church. In total he wrote four letters. Two were lost and the letters we have in the bible are actually his second and fourth letter, although they are named 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. So the book we're looking at today is his fourth letter. The third letter, which was lost, was thought to be quite severe. Paul had sent the third letter via Titus who hand delivered it to the Corinthians. We don't know the exact content of Paul's third letter, but we know it was a letter of correction. The reason for the fourth letter, or 2 Corinthians as we know it, was twofold. Firstly to defend his apostolic authority and secondly to make the church aware of his desire to collect money they had started raising for the poorer Christians in Jerusalem.

We've journeyed through the writings of Paul's defense in chapters 1 - 7, and now we come to the bit about the collection.

III. The Collection

Paul had been organizing this collection for the poorer Christians in Jerusalem. They were suffering hardships due to being ostracized by the Jewish community for their conversion to Christianity, due to the famine in AD 46, due to high taxes enforced by the Roman authorities and other contributing factors. Paul was seeking the wealthier Gentile churches to support the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, not just the church in Corinth but he also appealed to other churches in Galatia, Achaea, Macedonia and Asia Minor. As we read 2 Corinthians 8, we can understand the context of this passage is in relation to Paul's five year fundraising drive that was going on from AD 52 - 57.

2) Key Theme - Heart of the message

*"But just as you **excel** in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us - see that you also **excel** in this grace of giving."*

2 Cor 8:7

*"**One thing you lack**" said Jesus. "Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." - Mk 10:21*

There is a common theme here. We can have faith, we can be incredibly gifted, we can have mountains of knowledge, but the stumbling block for many of us is the area of giving. Jesus knows it. That's why he said it. That's why he humorously said it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. What was the stumbling block for Judas - money! Jesus knew - he knew before the betrayal.

The simple fact is that we can't serve God and money. There needs to be a choice in our lives. The riches of this world or the riches of heaven. The riches of heaven are available to us, but not without cost. It cost Jesus His life so that we may have that inheritance. Paul writes in verse 9,

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that though his poverty you may become rich.” 2 Cor 8:9

What an exchange! Jesus gave up his wealth, his majesty in heaven, everything and he became poor. He humbled himself. That through His poverty, we may become rich. Not financially rich, but eternally rich. The question is; what do we value more. Earthly wealth which will rust, rot and decay or eternal riches?

The ability to have joy in giving is a gift from God, given by grace. That is the grace of giving! It's what Paul said we should excel in. Our earthly spirits, un-renewed will not find total joy in giving. The sinful man is by nature greedy and self seeking. The renewed man is filled with the Spirit of God, which is a generous Spirit.

As God was doing a work in the lives of the Corinthians, refining them and pruning them, He wants to do the same with us. It's his will that we reflect Jesus. Not only in our faith, speech and knowledge, but in our giving.

3) Four attributes of an excellent giver

I want to look at four attributes that God wants to cultivate in the lives of every believer - specifically in the area of giving. Paul said he wanted to see the Corinthians excel in the area of giving - to be excellent at giving. The word excel appears twice in verse 7. He commends them on what they've excelled in, then tells them to excel in giving. The original Greek word for "excel" also means to "abound." So go above and beyond, to overflow in the grace of giving. So let's look at four points in this passage of an "abounding giver" or an "excellent giver."

I. Giving out of love - with a sincere heart

In verse 8, Paul says *"I am not commanding you, but I want to test the **sincerity of your love** by comparing it with the earnestness of others."* - 2 Cor 8:8

It could be suggested that Paul was comparing the Corinthian church to the Macedonian churches. Most commentators draw that conclusion. The Macedonian churches had given in spite of poverty and severe trial. Their love seemed to be sincere and Paul may have been saying, 'How does your giving measure up to those in Macedonia?' A fair comparison. We could look at Christians who live an impoverished life yet still give, and compare our earnestness with theirs. Does our sincerity measure up?

Although Paul could have been comparing the church in Corinth to those in Macedonia, I believe he goes beyond a human comparison. If we read verse 8 and then verse 9, Paul talks about the 'earnestness of others' and then goes straight on to reference our Lord Jesus Christ. It is about Jesus. It's always about Jesus. He is love! There has never been a more sincere love than the love which Jesus demonstrated in dying, not for righteous or good people, but for sinners.

Paul doesn't need to command them. He does something altogether more powerful than giving an apostolic command. In essence he's saying 'Compare yourselves with the One you claim to follow' (paraphrase). How sincere is your love?

Our love will truly be sincere when we love others in Christ and see them as He does. In our unsanctified condition we cannot have sincere love. We have to allow Christ into our hearts that His love and sincerity may work through us. That is why the first commandment is to love God. We can only truly love others in sincerity when we love him with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength.

We show our love for God by obeying His commands. As we walk out our lives aligned with His truth, sincere love works through us because He works through us. Peter wrote this in his first letter,

*"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have **sincere love** for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart." - 1 Peter 1:22*

As we seek to give out of sincere love, we must ask God to check our motives. Ask the Holy Spirit to show us any part in our hearts that may not be giving out of sincerity.

- Are we giving for public recognition?
- Are we giving for a pat on the back?
- Are we giving so that we'd feel good about ourselves?
- Are we giving in the hope that we may get more back with interest?
- Do we give in secret, but secretly hope that someone will hear about it?

If we are, our love is not sincere. Sincere love is love that gives for no other reason than love.

Example

Why is it that when we are street pastoring and we give someone a bottle of water or a pair of flip flops they start crying? It happens all the time. They don't cry immediately. They ask questions first. How much? Why are you doing this? What is the catch? It's only when they realize we are doing it out of no other reason than love, that they break down. Most have never experienced pure love. Not even in their marriages. It's always been love with a catch. God requires giving with no strings - that is the love through which Christ is glorified.

II. Giving beyond our ability

Paul, telling the church in Corinth of the Macedonian churches said this,

*“For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even **beyond their ability.**”*

- 2 Cor 8:3

The giving Paul is talking about is money. Of course our ability to give financially will differ depending on our bank balance. If you've been given a large inheritance or you're blessed with a well paid position, you'll have more money to give - that would be the theory. However Paul is making a point that earthly resources did not limit what they were able to give, because they gave more than they were able. You may think, how can you give more than you are able? Surely you can only give what you have?

There are a couple of points I'd like you to consider. Firstly, our ability to give is not only limited by our incomings, but also our outgoings and lifestyle choices. Say for example you're on £30,000 a year. If your outgoings and your lifestyle increase in line with your

salary, your ability to give will not increase beyond a certain percentage. If your salary goes up to £40,000 and you think, wonderful, I can buy that new car or we can have another couple of holidays, your percentage of giving remains fixed.

We have a tendency to set a threshold in our minds that is our giving percentage. For example, our 10% tithe. That is Christianity 101. We give our first 10% to the storehouse - the local church. We may then give offerings over and above that percentage, but usually we have a limit in mind. "Ok, I'll give 10% to the church, I'll sponsor a child and that's my bit done, I've ticked that box, Jesus won't bring that one up when I meet him face to face, phew!" That's what you call giving through gritted teeth. We are placing a benchmark on what we are able to give, based on that which is comfortable for us. Ultimately **we** are making the decision on what we're **able** to give.

God wants givers who excel in giving, who are abundant givers. What does it look like to go **beyond your ability** to give?

Simply put, to open our ears and our eyes and let God show us what to give - **then to do what He tells us**. Most of us won't go there because it seems dangerous and it seems risky. Imagine letting the God of love, who loves His church and loves the poor tell us what to give. But unless we allow God to break down our threshold, we will never experience overflowing joy in giving. We like to say we are Spirit filled people and a Spirit filled church. Spirit filled means more than speaking in tongues and operating in healing and the prophetic. What do we think it looks like to be a Spirit filled giver? A giver whose giving is dependent on the Holy Spirit telling them what to give.

III. Holding to our commitments

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth,

*“So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to **completion** this act of grace on your behalf.” - 2 Cor 8:6*

and

*“Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now **finish the work**, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your **completion** of it, according to your means.” - 2 Cor 8:10-11*

The Corinthians had pledged to collect money for the church in Jerusalem. Paul is advising them to be true to their word. God wants our yes to be yes and our no to be no. He hears the promises we make and expects us to complete what we've begun.

We are here as children of God because of the **finished and completed** work of Jesus. We see Him going through the human emotions of *“Father, if it's your will, take this cup from me.”* Let's not kid ourselves that Jesus was some kind of puppet who automatically did what He was told without any kind of internal battle. He was obedient, but the process was one of real sacrifice. It wasn't easy for Him to finish the work He was sent to do. But His love and oneness with the Father enabled Him to complete the work.

God is looking for committed people. We have many street pastors who are committed and I thank God for them. But we also have people who meet us and commit to giving themselves, their time, their money and after a couple of months, get bored and look for the next new, exciting thing. The

problem is that the buzz has gone, the newness, the honeymoon period is over. All of a sudden its become more about someone else, rather than me finding fulfillment in what God has called me to. Our calling to ministry or our calling to give is not about us! It's not about the perfect plan for our lives. In my experience, most people spend their time asking God about His plan for their ministry or their life calling. We need to ask God about His plan for Himself and how we fit into that. When we grasp that it's only in total abandonment to His plans for Himself that we find our life, then we'll receive the grace to stay the course, to keep on giving and giving without burning out or becoming downcast.

IV. Giving in all seasons

The Macedonians were impoverished, yet they gave with joy. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that it's not about what they don't have, it was about what they do have (v12).

Every good gift comes from God. Even when we have little, that little is from Him. God isn't looking at the size of the gift, He's looking at what it costs us to give. It costs the old lady who has £60 under her mattress more to give £10 in the collection than it costs someone who has £10,000 in the bank to give £1,000.

We need to set our stall out early in our lives to give first to God before all else. After all, if He gives us 100% of what we have, giving 10%, 20%, 30% back isn't a bad deal. For students, I would encourage you to get into the habit of giving regularly to God's work now. If you set a precedent in your life to give when you have little, it'll be easier to give when you have plenty. Those who say, "I'll give when I earn £25,000 a year" for example, will not actually give or at least will not give joyfully.

The fear for most is that God won't provide. Well we can choose to believe that or we can choose to believe His word.

It's written in 2 Cor 9:

“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge your harvest of righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.” - 2 Cor 9: 10-11

God promises to provide for us in **every way**. Not so that we can become rich for ourselves, but so that we can be **generous on every occasion**.

4) Summary

God wants us to excel in giving, to abound in giving, to overflow in giving.

He's looking for:

- 1) Giving out of love - that is sincere.
- 2) Giving that goes beyond our ability and relies on His grace.
- 3) Committed giving - holding to our word.
- 4) Giving in all seasons - being content in lack or plenty.

Take time to reflect and listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to you about your giving. Share with someone else - stay accountable to what God is saying.