

Exemplary Giving

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The book of II Corinthians can easily be divided into three main sections. The first comprises chapters 1-7. Paul defends his apostleship and outlines his work in these chapters. The second section is chapters 8-9 where Paul discusses the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. The third section is chapters 10-13 in which Paul is primarily concerned with his enemies and vindicates his own apostolic authority.

In chapter 8, verses 1-5, Paul gives us a glimpse of the spirit and character of the brethren in Macedonia concerning the contribution for the poor saints and others in Jerusalem (II Cor. 9:13). Macedonia was a Roman province. Paul refers to all the Christians in this region from the churches at Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. Paul uses their exemplary giving as inspiration for the Corinthian brethren. He desires two things. He wants the Corinthians to complete the contribution they had purposed to make and he wants them to display a spirit of liberality in accomplishing it.

The One Key Term

Charis is the key term in II Cor. 8-9. This word is commonly translated by the English word “grace.” However, it has different meanings in different contexts. Murray Harris relates that the term is found ten times in these two chapters and it is used in six different senses. The various senses he lists are: (1) “Grace,” referring either to God’s unconditional kindness lavishly displayed (8:9) or to God’s enablement, especially his enablement to participate worthily in the collection (8:1; 9:8,14); (2) “Privilege” or “favor,” used of the honor or opportunity of participating in the offering (8:4); (3) “Act of grace,” denoting the collection itself as a charitable and generous act (8:6); (4) “Grace of giving,” referring to the virtuous act of sharing or of

affording help (8:7); (5) “Offering” or “charitable work,” describing the collection as an expression and proof of goodwill (8:19); and (6) “Thanks,” the verbal expression of gratitude for an act of benevolence (8:16; 9:15) (NIGTC, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 559-560).

The Macedonians are touched by the grace of God! They understood that they owed their spiritual salvation, status of sonship, blessings in Christ, temporal blessings, and promises for the future to God. Paul states, “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (II Cor. 8:9). They had stepped into a mighty stream of grace and, now, touched by God’s grace, they became a channel of blessing to others. Grace engenders grace! The Macedonians did not need psychological goading or ministerial prompting. They were motivated by the riches of God’s mercy and grace!

Two Paradoxes

Paul mentions two paradoxes in verse 2. The first is **joy in the midst of affliction**. The Macedonians were being tested by affliction and yet experienced great joy. Paul described it as “a great trial of affliction.” The Greek word *pollē* (great, severe) describes the degree of the *dokimē* (test, trial). This was not a one-time test, but a continual testing and it was severe. What was being tested? We are not told. However, it could be their faithful standing in Christ. What was the nature of the affliction? Again, we are not told. It could be some form of persecution. In spite of this adverse situation, the Macedonians displayed abundant, boundless joy! This joy centers in relationship to God and is not dependent upon external circumstances. This is the joy that cannot be taken away or even diminished by earthly hardships. It is the joy of salvation. It is an internal peace and state of blessedness that comes from being right with God. Persecution reinforces this joy because suffering for righteousness sake confirms relationship with God.

The second paradox is **liberality in the midst of deep poverty**. The Greek word for poverty is *ptōcheia*. This word means “destitution” (W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, III, 196). Paul uses the same word in II Cor. 8:9 to describe the poverty which Christ voluntarily experienced in our behalf. Paul’s appeal to Christ’s example of generosity and selflessness, in addition to that of the Macedonian brethren, serves to **double** the motivation for generous giving among the Corinthians. The word “poverty”, by itself, signifies the state of the Macedonians. However, Paul adds “*kata bathous*” (*down to the depth*—Murray, 562). This is poverty at its deepest level. From this deep poverty, they displayed open-hearted liberality. The word liberality (Greek term *haplotētos*) refers to their sincerity, unaffectedness, or single-mindedness. They were amazingly honest, open-hearted and generous!

Most people in poverty seek aid for themselves. Most in poverty excuse themselves from helping others. The Macedonian brethren are exceptional in this case. They abounded unto the riches of their liberality. The size of the gift is never mentioned by Paul. The size of their heart is! Generosity is not measured in mere dollars, but in comparison of what is given in relationship to what is possessed.

Fourfold Evidence of Their Liberality

In II Cor. 8:3-5, Paul gives four evidences of the generosity of the Macedonians. First, consider **the extent of their liberality**. Paul states, “For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves.” Is Paul suggesting recklessness with regard to the way the Macedonians gave? Certainly, he is not! He is affirming the **sacrificial** nature of their gifts. Their generosity surpassed any expectations Paul may have harbored. Paul was a witness both to their power and to their giving beyond their power. They sacrificed for a worthy cause. Paul commends them for it and uses them as an example to motivate others.

Second, consider **the voluntary nature of their giving**. The Macedonians were not coerced or chided to give. They were willing of themselves to give (II Cor. 8:3). The adjective *authairetos* is found only here and in v. 17 in the New Testament. In v. 17, Paul describes the heart of Titus in the voluntary act of going to the Corinthians. *Authairetos* is formed from *autos*, meaning *self* and *haireomai*, meaning *to choose*. The word means “of one’s own accord.” (Vine, I, 23). Murray comments, “But if in this context the term excludes human pressure, it does not exclude divine influence (Meyer, 580)” (*Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 566). Their free-will act is prompted by divine grace!

Third, consider **their plea to participate**. Paul writes, “Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints” (II Cor. 8:4). Paul was impressed with their enthusiasm. They desired to participate rather than do nothing. They wanted to help those in need and they wanted to share with other Christians in the good work being accomplished. They set their eye upon the goal and determined to be part of the unified effort. The collection Paul was gathering amounted to a tremendous statement of unity among Gentile and Jewish Christians. The Macedonians refused to be left out.

Fourth, consider **they first surrendered themselves to the Lord**. Paul affirms, “And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God” (II Cor. 8:5). Murray comments, “Their giving involved their persons (*heautous* is emphatic by position) as well as their possessions” (Murray, 568). Through the sacrificial act of giving, the Macedonians had rededicated themselves to the Lord and His service. They also offered themselves to Paul as fellow-laborers and rendered personal assistance to his efforts. Their hearts were firmly united with Christ and with each other in labor for the Master! A more

beautiful picture of cooperation and oneness among brethren could not be found in all of Scripture.

When such a generous spirit of giving of both persons and possessions exists among brethren, the success of the work is guaranteed. Paul wrote to the church at Rome about five months after he wrote II Corinthians. He said, "For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things" (Rom. 15:26-27). Those giving and those receiving are made to rejoice. All are made to rejoice at the spirit of generous giving exemplified so magnanimously by the Macedonians.