

## **Why the Gospel Fuels Generosity** **2 Corinthians 8-9**

**Steve DeWitt**  
**November 19, 2017**

I want to talk with you today about how and why the gospel fuels generosity and I begin with our partner ministry, the City Life Center. This week I invited a couple local church leaders to come see for themselves what is happening at the City Life Center. These are good churches and good people and I was blessed that they agreed to come. They suspected that I was going to ask their churches to support the City Life Center financially, and they suspected right.

So perhaps with a bit of suspicion they came at 4:00pm on Wednesday. We sat in the Commons and told the story of how the center came to be. As we were talking, a line of adorable children came through making noise on their way to a class. They disappear into an adjacent room and start practicing music or something. We give the tour and go into a room with kids working on their homework. A couple of volunteers from our church are on their knees helping them. We go into the cafeteria and we explain that we have served 17,000 meals over the past year. What are the faces of these guests doing? They are nodding.

During the whole tour they were confronted with at-risk inner city kids who pay nothing at all being served meals, education, and fun by the City Life Center team. The one guest was a rather tough-looking FBI agent and I could tell even he was touched by what he saw. The question is, why? What was going on internally for our guests (and me too) as they saw the ministry of time, attention, love, and dollars flowing to these children?

That “something” is very important to the God of the universe. What is it? The short answer is glory. God is glorified by the generosity of his people. The longer answer is the one Paul gives in 2 Corinthians 8-9. The longer answer includes priorities every Christian should highly value. When we don’t, it reveals that the gospel has not truly taken root in our lives.

So I want to let the Apostle Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, summon all of us to the generous life as the godliest and most meaningful life we can experience.

*“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also.” (2 Corinthians 8:1–7 ESV)*

### **The Example of Financially Poor Christians’ Generosity (2 Corinthians 8:1-8)**

The context here is a region-wide offering the Apostle Paul is collecting for the needs of the church in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the church began on the day of Pentecost. Jerusalem was the hub of early apostolic activity. By 50 AD, the Jerusalem church was

impoverished due to a 10-year famine. The years of persecution of the church didn't help either.

Paul is ministering in the Gentile communities across Asia Minor and he told them of the difficulties of the Jerusalem Christians. Paul was passionate about this collection for a couple reasons. One was Christian compassion. Out of compassion for the poor and the suffering, Christians give to meet those needs. But the larger issue was a gospel and ethnic one. Jews and Gentiles were historic enemies. One of the hurdles of the early church was to see that there was not just a Jewish church or a Gentile church, but that there was one church. Paul writes to the Galatians, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:28)

The Jewish church birthed the Gentile church. What better way to show the unity of the church than for Gentile Christians to cross historic bigotry lines and to personally sacrifice to meet the needs of the Jewish believers? Few things say I love you better than cold, hard cash.

A fascinating development occurred in Macedonia. You see it in verse 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."* (2 Corinthians 8:2) The Macedonians were the Christians in northern Greece. This includes Philippi and Thessalonica. These were not wealthy areas like Rome or Corinth. In addition, these Christians had been severely persecuted. The result is Paul's description of their situation as *"test of affliction"* and *"extreme poverty."*

Yet when it came to giving to the needs of others, these Macedonians gave *"in a wealth of generosity."* (verse 2) This was not financial wealth but wealth of generosity. How so? Look at verse 4, they gave beyond their means and begged Paul to let them give to the Jerusalem offering.

Can you imagine this? These aren't the Roman Christians or the Laodicean Christians. They are the food stamp, government housing, welfare Macedonians. We want to give to the collection! *Please, please, we beg you, let us give! Please!*

We take up a collection each week and to my knowledge over the years I've never heard anyone begging. We have clapping. There's joy in it. But imagine begging for it. *Pastor Steve, can we take the offering now? We can't wait! Pass the baskets! Pass the baskets!* People would look around thinking, what kind of cult is this?

Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians. Corinth was rich. These were the upper-class Christians. The wine and cheese Christians. The country club Christians. 2,000 years later people still travel to Corinth to see the place. It was a hub of business and commerce.

Do you see what Paul is doing? He is pointing out to the wealthy Christians the begging to give by the poor Christians. *Hey Corinth, here's what the Macedonians are doing and they have nothing really to give. So what about you?*

If the financial books were opened here, I am sure many of us would be shocked at the incredibly faithful and generous giving by the "Macedonian" class of our church. If that is you, see in this text that God delights in your giving according to your means right down to the two mites of the widow.

Here is a time-proven statistic: the more people make, the less they give. I'm sure there are many exceptions and Scripture never glorifies poverty over wealth. But you would think it would be the opposite. Yet people get funny when they have money. Are you living in Macedonia? Giving in tough times is applauded in Scripture. Living in Corinth? Let Macedonian generosity challenge you.

### **The Incomprehensible Example of Christ (2 Corinthians 8:8-9)**

*"I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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."* (2 Corinthians 8:8-9)

The second way the gospel fuels generosity is the incomprehensible example of Jesus' generosity toward us. As an apostle, Paul could have commanded it. But instead, he appeals to the example of Christ; specifically, the selflessness of Jesus, who was rich. *"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof."* (Psalm 24:1) From a materialistic standpoint, the Son of God is rich. Infinitely rich. Everything is his. But that's not really what Paul is getting at. The poverty of Jesus is not a description of his financial standing on earth. Jesus was likely pretty much like everybody else at that time. He wasn't rich. He wasn't a beggar.

The condescension of Jesus was from the fullness of divine glory to the humiliation of his sufferings. His poverty was the cross. His poverty was the betrayal of his friends. His poverty was his sin-bearing. His poverty was ultimately his death. And all this was love. He gave it all.

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't tithe to us? He gave it all. The result is that we, the spiritually impoverished ones, through him, experience fullness. He was made sin so that we could be made righteous. He was made poor so we could be rich. Not materially, but much better—spiritually, relationally, eternally. Don't mistake real riches. There are rich poor. And there are poor rich.

**Poor Rich – materially comfortable, spiritually bankrupt**  
**Rich Poor – materially bankrupt, spiritually rich**

The poor rich are like the rich man in Jesus' story where the poor Lazarus sits outside his house eating his scraps. They both die. The rich man goes to eternal punishment and Lazarus goes to eternal life. Not because he was poor, but because he was saved. Lazarus was rich poor and the rich man was poor rich.

Living for the right kind of riches is the constant appeal of Scripture. *"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."* (Matthew 6:19-20)

My personal understanding and appreciation of the gospel in my own life will fuel kingdom-giving generosity. Jesus' example humbles and motivates me.

### **The Pleasure of God in Cheerful Giving (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)**

*"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully."* (2 Corinthians 9:6)

God rewards according to the seed principle of agriculture. The more seeds, the more harvest. Sowing seed is a metaphor for giving materially. The more you sow or give, the more you reap or receive. The prosperity preachers twist this as a get-rich-quick scheme. Terrible exegesis and terrible application. However, that is not to deny that God blesses those who give. See verses 8 and following. The blessing can come in any form God chooses, but the divine blessing is always far greater in spiritual value than what we gave. So, sow little, reap little. Sow much, reap much. Give little, reap little. Give much, reap much.

While giving is a command, we see here it is also an “oblitunity.” An oblitunity is when what we have to do is what we want to do. God loves it when our giving to him is more than a have to but a want to.

*"Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."* (2 Corinthians 9:7) God loves a cheerful giver. Would that mean he is less excited about the non-giver and the no-cheer giver? Why? Our happiness in giving is what turns the giving from mere charitable philanthropy into actual worship. It should feel very different writing your tax check versus writing your tithe check. One you have to do. While giving is a responsibility, we should strive to make it so much more. We want to. Like the Macedonians, we insist. This can and should be a joy. Or what Paul calls here, cheerful.

Money is the hardest thing to give to God. We will give time. Songs of praise. Even service to him. But money is the great stronghold of the human heart. Jesus said, *"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* (Matthew 6:21) Our hearts are tethered to our money. So the easiest way for our hearts to be tethered to heaven and to gospel ministry is to regularly invest our earthly treasure there.

The Christian appeal is not taxation-type giving but joyful giving. The fact that Paul had to point it out tells me the Corinthians weren't naturally joyous about it. The Macedonians were, but the Corinthians, who were rich, were more tightfisted. Paul reassures them...

### **The Glory of God is Magnified in Christian Generosity (2 Corinthians 9:12-13)**

*"For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others."* (2 Corinthians 9:12-13)

Paul ends his exhortation with the ultimate goal of all we do—the glory of God. How does a Christian's generosity produce praise to God?

### **Giving is the opposite of the culture's obsession with keeping**

Scottish Pastor Robert Murray McSheyne said this to his congregation 200 years ago...

*"I am concerned for the poor but more for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in the great day . . . To give largely and liberally, not grudgingly at all, requires a new heart; an old heart would rather part with its life-blood than its money. Oh my friends! Enjoy your*

*money; make the most of it; give none away; enjoy it quickly for I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity.*<sup>1</sup>

How true. The rich young ruler went away sad because he had great wealth. (Matthew 19:22) It's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:23) All of these statements talk about how the natural us relates to our money. How does this change? We need the new heart Jesus gives and to apply these new redeemed affections to the old idol of money. The fruit is generosity.

When we give it away, the culture around us stops and thinks, hmmm...like those folks I toured with around the City Life Center. A mostly south Lake County church doing compassion ministry to at-risk kids in downtown Gary. Hmm....

### **Giving "confesses" the gospel by re-enacting it**

When they ask, *why?* it's because of God's generosity to me. I was spiritually bankrupt. I was helpless like a poor widow or orphan. Yet God was generous to me in sending Jesus. The gospel is God's one-way love to us.

Wait, is your name going on the building or a plaque somewhere? No. It's not about me. I'm giving because Christ has changed my life. I have more joy in giving than I ever had in keeping. It's the gospel.

*Pastor Steve, are you talking about this because of More + Better?* Yes and no. *More + Better* provides an opportunity to talk about stewardship and generosity just like the Jerusalem offering gave Paul a chance to challenge the Macedonians and the Corinthians. Like the Jerusalem collection, *More + Better* provides an opportunity for application whether we are Macedonian or Corinthian or somewhere in between.

By the way, did the Corinthians come through after getting this letter? *"I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia [Corinth] have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it."* (Romans 15:25-26) May that be our story. Faithful stewarding of God's resources and gospel-fueled generosity. Cheerful to do it. Honored to give it to the King.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016).* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2017 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address ([www.bethelweb.org](http://www.bethelweb.org)) on the copied resource.

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis Chan, *Crazy Love*, pp. 89-90.