

## **2 Corinthians 8:1–15 – Grace-Filled Generosity**

*2 Corinthians series.*

*St Mark's Northbridge – 18/10/2020 AD*

BIG Idea: *Since Jesus gave Himself for us, then we abound in grace-filled generosity*

Well today we are back in the book of 2 Corinthians after having a break over the past term. And we are resuming in chapter 8 so please keep your Bibles open there as we have a look at this part of God's word together.

**But first let me Pray.**

### **Defibrillators and Philanthropy**

If you remember the late Kerry Packer then you'd know that he had a reputation for many things. As an Australian billionaire, he was instrumental in the rise of Channel Nine. As a sports fan, he was crucial in the revolution of one-day cricket – think cricketers wearing coloured clothing and playing under lights for the first time. And of course, Kerry Packer left you in no doubt as to what he thought of the Australian tax system. He was what you would call a 'larger than life' figure. And that might even be an understatement. There are many stories of Kerry Packer and the way he used his wealth and influence to make things happen.

But perhaps one of the most important things that he ever did was that he paid for every single ambulance in New South Wales to be fitted with a defibrillator. When he suffered a heart attack himself, Kerry Packer was revived when the ambulance that attended him was fitted with a defibrillator. At that stage it was only one of a handful of ambulances which was fitted with one, and it just happened to be one that attended him!

You see, this event led Kerry Packer to make sure that every ambulance was fitted with a defibrillator. He was determined to fund such equipment so that lives could be saved. And as someone with the money, he was able to make it happen.

And while the world of billionaires giving away large sums of money for good causes might seem distant to us, the question of what motivates you to be generous is one that we can all relate to and consider.

When you think about your giving, what motivates you to be generous? What's your reason for being generous with your money or the things you own?

We might be generous out of duty or obligation. Or maybe because we want to make a difference, or 'do something good'. If we're honest, we might be generous out of pride or because we want to have a reputation of being generous. Or still we might be generous because that's just what we were taught or told to do.

There are many reasons why we might be generous. But how does being a follower of Jesus shape this? What makes Christian generosity different?

Well that's what Paul addresses in this chapter and the next. And he's writing to the Christians in Corinth so they will have gospel-shaped and grace-filled generosity. And of course these are matters that we need to consider as well. We need to consider why we are to be generous with what God has given us.

Now, the topic of money and giving is an issue which polarises Christians. On the one hand, in some churches it can feel like Christians talk about money way too much.<sup>1</sup>

Or on the other hand, this topic of money and giving is one that we might hardly ever talk about.<sup>2</sup> Any my impression is that we probably don't talk about it nearly enough as Christians, especially as part of our godliness.

But either way, in this passage we have one of the Bible's clearest teachings on generosity and why Christians are to give. So there's no avoiding it.

### **The Macedonian Model of Generosity (8:1-5)**

So as we turn to our passage, Paul writes to the Corinthians and starts by telling them about another group of Christians: the churches in Macedonia. And they are a model of grace-filled generosity.

Paul says there from verse 1:

*And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*

So in the midst of hardship, these Macedonian Christians gave generously. We don't know what the exact hardship was. We read there that they experienced "extreme poverty". So it's affected them financially.

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<sup>1</sup> It can seem like the extent of being a Christian seems to be all about how you use your money and how much you give. And there can be a cynicism of some churches because all they ever seem to do is ask people for more money.

<sup>2</sup> We can neglect to talk about because we assume that everyone is giving enough and so there's no need to talk about it. Or that it's a personal matter and too embarrassing to talk about.

And yet, they had **joy** and this overflowed into them being generous. Not the kind of thing you'd expect from people going through severe trials. They just kept going. They just kept giving and being generous.

In the movie *Finding Nemo*, there's a memorable line from Dory where she says: "When life gets you down do you wanna know what you've gotta do? Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming". You'd think the Macedonian Christians would be saying to each other, "Just keep giving. Just keep giving" as they went through this trial. And they gave even more!

We see there in verse 3: *that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.*

Now that's radical generosity! They didn't shut up shop but they doubled down and gave even more. Beyond their ability and capacity!

What the Macedonians did seems to echo the poor widow in the temple who gave two small copper coins – everything that she had. And Jesus said that: *she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.*<sup>3</sup>

Right here Jesus could be saying those exact words of the Macedonians.

And what the Macedonians did came from their desire to serve God's people. In verse 4 we read that they *urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.*

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:41-44

No matter what they were going through, they still wanted to put others' needs before their own. They saw serving other believers and giving to them as a privilege. Not a chore, or a burden, or an obligation. But a privilege. That even in the midst of a severe trial they still wanted and desired to serve others.

Now that certainly challenges our attitude towards others when we fall on tough times. So often when hardship hits, we are told to just make sure our own needs are being met. But how often do we keep looking out for others, even when we're doing it tough ourselves?

You can see why Paul highlights the Macedonians as the model of generosity. Their response to hardship and trial was so unusual! It was so unselfish. It was an act of God's grace in their lives which resulted in their act of goodness to others, even in such adversity.

### **Excel in Generosity (8:6-7)**

And Paul holds up these Macedonians as an example because he wants the Corinthians to imitate them. Like the Macedonians, he wants the Corinthians to excel in generosity. He wants them to abound and overflow in generosity.

We see there in verse 6 that Paul has sent Titus to Corinth so that the Corinthians would also complete this act of grace. That the Corinthians too would be generous just as the

Macedonians were. And that's because giving generously is a matter of godliness and Christian discipleship. In verse 7 Paul says:

*7 But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.*

So giving and being generous is something to excel in – something that you want to see more and more of in your Christian life. Just like faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love are things to be abounding in, so is being generous. Being a Christian in the way you are generous and use your money is important. It is something to excel in.

You see there are many things that we want to improve and excel in. You might want to excel in your profession or job so you can be more proficient. You might want to excel at being a better parent. You might want to excel at school and do well in the HSC. You might want to excel on the sports field or improve your fitness.

And as a Christian there might be areas of godliness that you want to grow in. You might want to grow in being patient and compassionate towards others, being gracious in the way you speak, being pure in your thoughts and desires, being loving and kind towards others. All good things to excel in.

But as a Christian, how often do you consider generosity and giving as something to excel and grow in?

If I'm honest, generosity is not one of the first things that comes to my mind when I think of an area of godliness to excel and abound in. But Paul is holding up generosity

and giving as being an important part of our godliness. Something we should seek to excel in.

So as brothers and sisters, it means that generosity and giving, and our use of money isn't a taboo topic that we never talk about. In fact, as we seek to grow in our godliness together, as we seek to excel in being generous, then it's right and proper that we ask each other how we are going in being generous.

So we are to excel in being generous.

And what will enable this is to have the right motivations and reasons.

### **The True Motivation for Generosity (8:8-9)**

What will truly motivate Christians to be generous is the condition of their hearts.

That's why in verse 8 Paul says to the Corinthians:

*8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.*

For Paul, he wants the Corinthians to be generous not by commanding them, or sending them on a guilt trip, but by having hearts that desire to love others.

And it's interesting that he does this by comparing their desires with that of others. He's giving the example of the Macedonians in order to stir their hearts. To see how the Corinthians compare with the generosity of the Macedonians.

But ultimately Paul wants the Corinthians to see the reason **why** the Macedonians are generous. Their generosity came as result of knowing the gospel of God's abundant generosity in sending Jesus.

This gospel of God's generosity where in verse 9:

*9 (the) Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.*

Christian generosity stems from the generosity of Jesus. That in the gospel we see how Jesus left the riches of heaven and came to earth. And he came as a man and died a humiliating death on the cross for sinners like us – people who are completely bankrupt before God, with nothing to offer him. And yet in his death Jesus paid the debt of our sin that we could never repay to God. And through his death we go from the poverty of being peasants in our sin, to being in the king's household.<sup>4</sup> The gospel is a message of generosity. Of God's grace. God's generosity to us who don't deserve it.

And it's that generosity from Jesus that shapes Christian generosity and giving to others. Since Christ has served us and has given himself for us, then we count it a privilege to serve and give ourselves to others.

So Christians aren't generous because of duty, or obligation, or guilt or compulsion, or because we want to have a reputation of being someone who is generous.

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<sup>4</sup> The Prodigal Son – goes from being out with the pigs to welcomed home into his father's house and the robe put on him – (Luke 15)

We are motivated by God's grace to us. Our reason for being generous is because of Jesus. Our generosity is cross-shaped generosity. It's out of our love for Jesus and what He has done for us that we will want to give to others.<sup>5</sup>

So the Lord Jesus and his generosity in giving himself on the cross is our motivation for generosity and giving.

### **Enacted Generosity (8:10-12)**

So having the right foundation for being generous and giving is important.

But so is following through on your intentions. Not just having the desire, but to also act on your intentions to be generous.

And that's what Paul urges the Corinthians to do. As an apostle of Jesus, his judgment and opinion to them is to not just have the desire, but to actually give generously. That's what he points to in verse 10 – that in the previous year the Corinthians began to desire to be generous. And so in verse 11 they are to:

*... finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.*

Their eagerness to be generous is to be matched by their action. They are to follow through on their plans to give generously.

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<sup>5</sup> Even when we see examples of other Christians and their generosity – like the Macedonians, or even fellow Christians you personally know – it highlights God's grace to them. That God has so moved in people by the gospel of Jesus that it has led them to overflow with generosity. And so it should be with us too!

And I'm sure this is something we all understand. That we all have plans and intentions to do things – including hopefully being generous with what God has given us. But all too often we don't follow through on our plans and intentions. And often it's the busyness of life which stops us.

So brothers and sisters, if you have been gripped by God's grace in the Lord Jesus, can I urge you to follow through on your intentions to be generous. And I think there are two practical things to help us follow through on being generous:

The first thing is to give yourself to the Lord in prayer. When it comes to considering your generosity, ask God to give you a heart that desires to be generous – a willingness to love others with what God has given you. Ask God to give you a heart and a desire that is shaped by His grace.

And the second thing is to set aside some time to work out how you can be generous – some time to work out our giving and how we are going to be generous with what God has given us. This might be something you do once a year or more frequently. And you might do this as part of a season of life admin or as you work out your household budget. You might want to put down a date in your calendar to do this.

But the point is to make the time to work out how you can be generous so that you will actually follow through on your intentions. If we want to be people who enact generosity, then we've got to be deliberate. Otherwise we just won't get around to it, no matter how good our intentions are.

And back in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 we see there at the end of verse 11 being generous is *according to your means*.

So generosity and giving is for everyone – no matter how much or how little you have.

It's not about reaching a certain level of income before you can start being generous.

No, it's about having a heart that wants to be generous with as little or as much as God has given you. And not just having the intention or desire, but following through and actively being generous.

So generosity is to be enacted, not just desired.

### **Interdependent Generosity (8:13-15)**

And Christian generosity is seen in the way God's church looks out for one another – wherever they may be. As God's church we are not independent self-contained units but we are **inter**dependent. We need God and one another. Firstly we are dependent on God. Everything that we have comes from His hand. But secondly we rely on one another as God's people. And that fellowship shapes our generosity towards each other since we are interdependent.

And in the last few verses Paul shows how this interdependent generosity plays itself out. From verse 13 he says to the Corinthians that the purpose of Christian generosity is: *not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality*.

Being generous is not about one group of people experiencing hardship and others having relief. No, it's about equality.

And for the Corinthians, as Paul says to them in verse 14, at the moment they have a surplus. They have more than enough to get by. And so, that means they are able to supply the needs of those who have less.

Now this emphasis on “equality” by Paul can make it seem a bit like he's writing a chapter in a Socialist manifesto. That he is wanting all Christians to have the exact same living standard. And that if you are a Christian who happens to be more wealthy than others, then it's not right and something to be ashamed of.

But I don't think Paul is saying that. His desire is for all Christians, no matter how wealthy they are to have a willingness to be generous and to see that other Christians are looked after. That there is a desire and motivation to help other Christians because of God's grace and your Christian fellowship, not out of coercion or guilt or by having your assets seized and given away forcibly.

But let's also not lose the force of what Paul is teaching here. If you are in a position where you have more than others, then remember as a Christian your posture must be one of generosity. And even more so if you have plenty while others are in need. If God has given you an abundance, and let's face it, that's us here in Australia, then we have the privilege of supplying the needs of other saints who have less. And we do this because of Jesus. He was rich, and yet for our sake he became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich.

And that's why it's encouraging to see the many mission partners that we partner with here at St Mark's. That as a church we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. We are in fellowship with other Christians around the world as we give financially to them. That our plenty and abundance here in Sydney can supply the needs of others around the world.

It's an example of how interdependent we are as Christians and how our generosity and giving reflects this.

Now as we finish I want to share with you how this 2 Corinthians grace-filled interdependent generosity can be seen right here in our city – and not too far from us in Northbridge.

You might know that here in Sydney in the south west there are a number of churches which are small and struggling, and dying in some cases. For many reasons these churches struggle to pay the bills and fund their ministries.

And a church here on the north shore, not too far from here, realised that they had an abundance. That God had given them plenty – financially and with mature Christians – people who were trained and equipped for ministry. And so this church firstly prayed for the work of the gospel in south west Sydney. And it led to this church generously deciding to fund some of the ministries of a church in the south west. But it didn't stop there, this church on the north shore sent one of their assistant pastors to lead this church. And they funded his ministry for several years. Out of their own pocket. And

they didn't just send this pastor, but a few families from this church moved from the north shore to south west Sydney so they could serve in that church.

And by God's grace, several years on, this church in south west Sydney is growing.

People are coming to Christ and the ministry there is growing.

And there are many similar stories like that here in Sydney. Where God's people are motivated by the grace of our Lord Jesus to give generously. Where our fellowship in the gospel leads churches to use their abundance to supply the needs of their brothers and sisters, wherever they are.

**Let's Pray.**