

2 Corinthians 8:1-24

Grace in Action

Spending money will always attract more attention than giving money away

Last month, Jeff Bezos the founder of Amazon and the fourth richest man in the world married Lauren Sanchez in a lavish wedding in Venice

The wedding was attended by 200 A-list celebrities

And Forbes estimates that the wedding cost somewhere between \$20-25 million US dollars

With some other agencies estimating that it cost up to \$50 million dollars

Which is a lot of money by anyone's imagination

I helped him to pay for that wedding with my Amazon Prime Day purchases this week.

This wedding of course made headlines across the world

On the other hand

This is Mackenzie Scott

Jeff Bezos' first wife

And what doesn't gain much attention in the media is that Mackenzie Scott

As of December last year has given away \$19 billion dollars to charities

since their divorce five years ago

Making her one of the largest philanthropists in human history

This of course doesn't make any headlines

Because we seem more interested in spending than giving

But what we're going to see in today's bible passage in 2 Corinthians 8

Is that *giving away money* is a key mark of being a follower of Jesus

Giving to others, shows whether or not you understand the grace of God

And what Paul wants for all Christians

Is that we excel in the grace of giving.

The background of today's passage is the collection of money for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem

You can see a number of New Testament passages on the outline that you can study in your own time

But the basic summary is that over the best part of 10 years

Paul and other Christian leaders make a large collection of funds

for the Christian believers in Jerusalem

who were experiencing hardship because of famine and other factors

And so they encourage Gentile believers spread across the regions of

Macedonia, Achaia, Galatia and Asia Minor

To make regular offerings that are eventually collected and taken by a group of Christian leaders.

To deliver to the church in Jerusalem.

One of the reasons that Paul sees for this collection is the principle of gospel unity between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians

The two chapters before us this week (chapter 8) and next week (chapter 9) are focused in on how Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to give generously to this collection.

And I this week and then Clinton next week

Will look at the principles that we can learn and apply to our own giving.

Now the bible has much to say about money

But these chapters are focused specifically on the motivations we should have
To give away the money that God gives us
And also how we should handle the money that is to be used for others.

We're going to look at two points today

Excel in the grace of giving as:

- 1. Modelled by others and Christ**
- 2. And as Administered with integrity**

Let's look at the first point

Excel in the grace of giving as modelled by others and by Christ

In the first 6 verses of this chapter, Paul uses the example of the Macedonian churches
To appeal to the Corinthian Christians to give
The churches of Macedonia are the churches of Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi
And when it came to the way they responded to the collection for the believers
They were incredibly joyful and generous

Look at verse 2 *even in their extreme poverty they overflowed in a wealth of generosity*
These churches were not rich themselves, definitely not in comparison to the Corinthians
in fact they had also suffered economically like the Jewish believers,
Yet this didn't prevent them from giving according to their ability
Even verse 3 giving *beyond* their ability and none of this was forced by the apostles but of their own accord
In fact, Paul says in verse 4
They begged the apostles earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints

When was the last time you heard about people *begging* to give their money to others.
Normally we see the giving away of money as something of an obligation – a duty
And giving away our money as a loss of something
For ourselves

But that is not how the Macedonian Christians viewed the collection
Look at verse 1 and verse 4

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia.
Verse 4 - They begged us earnestly for the grace of sharing in the ministry to the saints

The word translated as privilege in the CSB in verse 4 is literally the word grace
And that word grace is all over the first half of our passage

The Corinthians saw the act of giving to this collection
As a means of participating in the grace of God.
When we think of God's grace we normally think of his saving grace – God's undeserved kindness
Towards us sinners in sending Jesus to die for us.
But here is Paul extending the idea of grace as being something that we can participate in

When we give generously
We also can be experiencing the grace of God
By showing mercy towards others in our generous giving.
And that is what the Macedonian churches don't want to miss out on
Participating even more in God's grace

The Greek word for grace is "charis"
From which we derive the word "charismatic" which literally means gift of grace
And normally when Christians use the word "charismatic" we're referring to gifts like speaking in tongues and prophecy.
But these Macedonian churches are striving to be charismatic
They want to exercise the gift of giving as an ongoing act of grace.
And let me say this was not a one-off attitude for these churches
They gave generously over a long period of time

Listen to how the Philippian church supported Paul's own gospel ministry
This is Philippians 4

¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

This church financially supported Paul
They started not long after he planted their church and when they became Christians
And they even continued supporting him at the time he wrote the letter
With gifts brought by Epaphroditus – and that's a period of ten years
These Macedonian churches are truly grace-filled churches.
They are charismatic churches
They reflect the very heartbeat of what it means to be a Christian
Look at verse 5
They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will.

That is a great summary of what it means to live as a Christian
They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will.

What a verse to commit to memory for the week to come
To be a Christian is to understand the depths of grace that God has shown you in Christ
Such that you respond in self-giving love first to the Lord Jesus
And then inevitably to those whom He loves.

Now why is Paul giving the example of the Macedonian churches to the Corinthians?
Because he wants them also to excel in the grace of giving like the Macedonians
Now notice in verse 7
When we know the Lord Jesus we should seek to glorify him in every aspect of our lives
Whether that is speech, knowledge, diligence and love
But also in the grace of giving generously.

Now notice Paul is not laying down the law.

He is not giving the Corinthians rules to follow.
But a model to imitate.
By looking to the model of others – namely the Macedonian churches
Paul is trying to spur on the Corinthians
He is appealing to them to take hold of God's grace
And love genuinely and selflessly in their giving.

Often when we compare ourselves to others
We tend to compare in such a way as to feel better about ourselves
To boast in comparison to them
And that has been a failing of the Corinthians
They loved to boast in comparison to others
But what if in fact you're inspired and challenged by others

A couple of months ago I was invited by a Warrnambool Presbyterian church
To preach at their annual camp
And in one of my sermons
I was speaking to them about not becoming like two churches in the book of Revelation
Who had lost their first love for Jesus
And who had become lukewarm
I gave them the example of Ana from our 5pm congregation as an example of someone
Who hasn't lost her first love and hasn't become lukewarm
I said that Ana was one of my heroes
Because of her evident love for Jesus and others
Ana has gone to one of the most challenging countries in the world
To do a 6-month internship
To learn how to share the gospel and the love of Christ with women and girls who have suffered greatly
Ana to me, excels in God's grace of giving to others

At the end of that sermon
A person from the church came straight up to me
And said, I want to give money to Ana to support her ministry
And I had not asked the congregation to give any money
No this person was compelled by Ana's example and spurred immediately to do something about it
When you look at those who imitate Christ
How can you sit there and do nothing about it?
Who is it that spurs you on to give with grace?
Who around you are the models of selfless giving that inspire you to give?

This leads us to the most important verse of this passage
And the greatest model and motivation for our giving
Christ himself
Verse 9

⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

If you forget everything else about this sermon

This is the one verse to remember
And it is a verse that is very similar to a passage in Philippians 2
Before Jesus took on human flesh
Jesus was rich beyond imagination
He had equality with God
The universe was made by him and for him
And yet Jesus didn't exploit this wealth
He emptied himself of it by becoming human
He became poor in other words
Born to a teenager in a lowly manger
Becoming obedient even to the point of death on a cross
Why? In order to make us rich
To give us a way of being made right with God
Which is a treasure to which everything else is considered garbage
This is the stunning grace of God
Kindness beyond compare
Humility that we are to imitate
Excel in this grace of giving as modelled by your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

You know to be honest,
Sometimes I think, it would just have been easier
If Paul just made a law about giving
Here is the amount you should give every week
here is the set percentage that you should to set aside
And you know what I would do
I would give that minimum amount and I would say job done
The rest is mine, all mine
No generosity, no compassion, no love, no humility
Just selfishness

You see the thing about law is that it is not grace
Law doesn't change hearts
But Grace captures hearts and transforms them
Remember Zacchaeus the tax collector, once driven by greed for money
What did he say after meeting Jesus
I will give half my possessions to the poor
And pay back 4 times what I cheated others out of
You know what transformed Zaccheus – not the law
But the grace of Christ who ate with him – a sinner

Look at 2 Corinthians 8 verse 9
Look at the grace of the cross of Christ
By his poverty you became rich
Meditate on that verse,
Until it melts your heart to selfless love

The question is not

Why should I give?
It's why did He give himself for me?
The question is not
How much should I give?
It's how much did He give to me?

The question is not
What's in this for me?
It's what I can do first for the Lord and then for others
Out of sheer thankfulness
That a wretched sinner like me
Spiritually bankrupt and destined for the eternal fire of hell
Would be welcomed by my heavenly father
Lavished with the riches of his forgiveness to sit at his table and eat with him
Forgiven and clothed in the finest clothes

If you understand the grace of Christ it must drive you to generous, selfless giving
Of your time, your money, your love
To share with those in need

I love that verse from that great hymn "When I survey the wondrous cross"
Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all
Let the grace of Christ shape you to give generously?

This brings us to our second point

Excel in the grace of giving as administered with integrity

Paul now takes great care in talking about how we as givers and those handling the giving of others
Should administer God's funds.

He knows how damaging it is to the reputation of Jesus and the gospel when money is mishandled.
And here we have a number of principles that we can apply when handling our giving.

The first for us as givers is this.

Give don't just promise.

Verse 10

¹⁰ And in this matter I am giving advice because it is profitable for you, who began last year not only to do something but also to want to do it. ¹¹ Now also finish the task, so that just as there was an eager desire, there may also be a completion, according to what you have.

It seems that Titus had visited the Corinthian church the year before
to talk to the Corinthians about the collection

And it seems from chapter 9 that the Corinthians were very eager to make a generous gift
But Paul is now saying Titus is coming back to complete the act of grace by taking the collection
So make sure you keep your pledge

In other words - put your money where your mouth is
Give, don't just promise.

The same is true for us, it's so easy to make a promise to give money
Whether that is to the work of the gospel or to the poor
It's easy for that to be lip service
I'll get around to giving
And yet when the time comes,
There's always something else that demands the money
Car registration, insurances, holidays, school fees
And before you know it
We never get around to keeping the promises we make to give
What would Paul say to you today?
Finish the task.
Don't just "want to do it"
"Give, don't just promise"

Here's another principle

Give according to your means

Look at verse 12

¹² For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

Notice that Paul doesn't specify an amount to give

No percentages like the Old Testament tithe

Instead Paul speaks about motivation (eagerness of heart) and about means (what you have)

This is entirely consistent with what Jesus said about the poor widow giving her offering to the temple

Mark 12

Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents... Jesus said, ⁴³ "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

You won't be compared to Bill and Melinda Gates in your giving

Neither will you be compared to anyone else here in this congregation

We don't record pledges of giving

We don't keep records of people's giving here

Because it is the Lord Jesus who judges our hearts

And he will judge according to your own generosity of your heart and your own means

Learn from the generosity of this widow and give according to the means God gives you

Not what anyone else thinks.

Here's another principle – gospel equality matters

In verses 13-15

According to Paul, the understanding is that Christians are brothers and sisters who respond to the needs of their siblings with a view towards equality

Such that there is no brother or sister who should suffer needlessly when others live in abundance.

And so when God blesses us financially, we should respond to those in need
And it may be the case that when we are in financial need in the future, they too will respond to us.
Paul then uses the Old Testament example of God providing manna for the people of the Exodus each day
Such that there was no one with excessive abundance or poverty but He provided just what they needed
Equality matters to God and His people

During the covid pandemic
We made an appeal to you to give to our hardship fund to help our Iranian brothers and sisters
Who were not able to work during the lockdown
And you gave generously – because of this principle of gospel equality
We have also made other appeals over the years
Due to the Black Saturday blackfires
Or life changing accidents
And again you have responded with generous giving because of this principle of gospel equality
Those who had means, were able to help those in need

Here's another principle

Money given for others should be handled by trustworthy people

It is not a single person sent to collect this large amount of funds from the Corinthians
But a group of trustworthy people
In fact Paul mentions three men here
Titus is the only one mentioned by name
One whom Paul describes as very diligent in verse 16
Paul's co-worker in the gospel verse 23
Accompanying him is another Christian brother who is praised amongst all the churches verse 18
Someone we assume that the Corinthians would have known or heard of
But there is yet another brother (verse 22) that Paul sends who has a track record
Of being tested and found diligent.

What does this look like in our church?

No single person in our church has power over the financial giving and how it to be used
Rather we have a board of management entrusted with stewarding the property and finances of this church
This is a different group from the elders who have spiritual oversight of the church
This is a check and a balance to make sure that power is not concentrated in an individual or a few people.
The board are responsible for helping us come up with a budget to pay for staff wages
To ensure that money is spent on gospel ministry here and mission overseas
As well as maintaining and repairing our building for ongoing ministry
The Board also helps us ensure that money given to our Hardship Fund
Is used for people experiencing genuine adversity
The Board makes sure that our financial reports are audited by an external auditor
And that our budget is presented to and approved by the congregation
At our annual congregational meeting
Now it is your job to make sure that trustworthy people are elected to the board for their two-year terms
And if you're someone that others consider trustworthy,
then you should consider serving on the Board of Management
And when you see these verses, and how Paul and the churches value Titus and his two co-workers
Express your thankfulness to God for the trustworthy men and women who serve on our Board

And appreciate their quiet diligence for the gospel and the glory of God.
And pray for their important ministry in handling large amounts of money
that have been given for the gospel

Finally, integrity in giving means accountability before God and people

Verse 19

We are administering for the glory of the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. ²⁰ We are taking this precaution so that no one will criticize us about this large sum that we are administering. ²¹ Indeed, we are giving careful thought to do what is right, not only before the Lord but also before people.

Notice verse 19 – we administer funds for the glory of God

And so accountability is important

We must not only do what is right with other people's giving

but we must be seen to be doing right before God and before others

10 years ago

The Senior Pastor of City Harvest Church, Kong Hee

Was convicted by the Singaporean courts for having misused \$50 million dollars of the church's funds

The courts found that the church used sham bonds and fake loan agreements

And falsified documents to make it look like the money was being invested

When instead the money was being used to promote his wife Sun Ho's failed pop music career

Kong Hee and five other church leaders were found guilty and spent time in prison

How do you think this looks for a watching world that doesn't yet know Christ?

It's not a good look is it?

Every year the staff here at this church have a Christmas lunch together

And whenever we've gone out to a café or restaurant

Our former senior pastor Neil always paid for our lunch from his own funds

And He never claimed it as an expense of the church

And I know that many of you here would have no problems if Neil had claimed it

In fact, I'm sure many of you would want us to have a Christmas lunch

But what Neil taught me is the perception

That we need to be beyond reproach and accusation

The money given by people, is to be used for the gospel and for others

Not to benefit ourselves, and so Neil was putting verse 21 into action

Giving careful thought to doing what is right before God and before people.

Now there is a final section where I wanted to quickly mention

Who should we give to?

The first responsibility for you to give to is your own family

In fact Paul says in 1 Timothy 5: ⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his own family, especially for his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Your family is your first responsibility.

You should give to those who teach you and your kids the gospel.

Galatians 6:6

6 Let the one who is taught the word share all his good things with the teacher.

1 Corinthians 11

If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it too much if we reap material benefits from you?

For the last 26 years

Every month I give money to the AFES staffworker Dave who helped me understand the gospel

When I was at uni

He sowed gospel seed into my life that will last into eternity

It is only right that I continue to give to his ongoing ministry

Both the Old and the New Testament say that we should give to the needy

To provide for the orphan and the widow

First to those who belong to Christ but also to your neighbour in need just as the Good Samaritan did

For many years, my family have given every month to the work of Compassion

Ministering to kids in developing countries and I know many others here do in the church as well

The work of TEAR is also a ministry that we support ministering to the most needy in our world.

Give to those who do the work of spreading the gospel in mission

I have already shared with you about how the Philippian Christians supported the work of Paul as he left Macedonia and continued to do his mission work

In Luke 8 we learn that Jesus' own ministry of preaching the gospel

Was supported by many women of means including Mary Magdalene

And so we also should continue to support those who spread the gospel

Here in this church we give a percentage of our general offering to the Missions Committee

Who then distribute this amount to the various missionaries that we pray for and support

But there are also a number of staffworkers here at this church who share the gospel at uni campuses like RMIT through the Christian Union

Who you give money to and how much you give is between you and God.

You can ask others for wisdom and they might even share with you what they do

But from what you've heard today generous giving is a mark of a genuine Christian

And a genuine Christian who knows the grace of Christ

Must put that grace into action

Pray and ask God for wisdom then follow through on a plan to give generously

Let me finish with the example of John Wesley

The founder of the Methodist Movement

That sparked Christian revival in England in the 18th century

As well as helping to educate the poor through the establishment of Sunday Schools

And to care for the poor through medical clinics and homes for orphanages and widows

In his sermon entitled "The Use of Money" which you can read online

He famously said "Gain all you can" through honest work with all diligence

"Save all you can" by not wasting money on foolish indulgences.

And "Give all you can" by stewarding what you have on your family, God's church and all mankind.

And John Wesley put his money where his mouth was.

Early in his ministry,

He determined that he could live on 28 pounds per year and gave the surplus 2 pounds away

Over time Wesley's reputation grew and his publications were earning 1400 pounds per year

And yet he continued to live on 28 pound per year and gave the rest away
It's believed that Wesley lived off 2% of what he earned and gave 98% away to those in need
If we convert what he lived on to \$60,000 per year
Wesley gave away at least \$60 million over his lifetime.
That is grace in action.

Excel in the grace of giving as modelled by others and Christ
And administer that giving with integrity.