

Guilt-Free Giving **2 Corinthians 8:1-15**

We are in 2 Corinthians 8 this morning which brings us to a new topic and what is probably the last section of the first letter contained in this book. 2 Corinthians probably contains 2 letters of Paul that were written a couple of months apart. The first ends with chapter 9 and the second (or at least the remnants of it) is contained in chapters 10-13. So this section we're looking at includes chapters 8-9 and the topic it focuses on is Christian giving. It isn't just a general teaching – we're actually diving into a specific situation that had been going on for about a year. So in order to make sense of what he writes, we need to understand the situation, and then we can look at what he writes so that we can glean principles from it and be able to understand God's will for our lives when it comes to Christian giving.

I've seen a lot of confusing things related to Christian giving. In the day and age of the Prosperity Gospel, TV preachers, televangelists, and more, there is a lot of bad teaching, a lot of misunderstanding, a lot of coercion and guilt. And I really think these chapters will clear up a lot of things and give us a confidence in knowing what God's will is and joyfully practicing it. When it comes to Christian giving, there are concrete principles to follow as well as unique Holy Spirit promptings to respond to, and we'll see both in these chapters. So first, I'm going to explain the situation and then we'll start digging into the content.

According to Colin Kruse in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, there was a pretty bad famine in Jerusalem and Judea during the reign of Emperor Claudius, which was in the years of 41-54AD. So the Christians and churches in that region were hit pretty hard with poverty and need. Because of that, the church leaders in Jerusalem asked Paul to remember the poor as he traveled to the Gentile churches in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia. Paul took this to heart and as he went to the new churches, he would ask them to take up a collection so that they could send aid to the believers in Judea.

This was a big deal because it was more than just supplying aid to suffering Christians, it also could break down some walls that existed between 1st century Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians, who were

predominantly in the famine affected area of Judea, had a hard time believing that God's grace and the Holy Spirit and salvation could be extended to the Gentiles. They had grown up believing that Gentiles were pagans, worshippers of false gods, and opposed to the one true God. They had understood that they were separated from God and shut out of his kingdom. However, due to the missionary efforts of Paul and others, those assumptions were being challenged. The reports were that God was working among the Gentiles and granting grace, mercy and salvation. The Holy Spirit was actually working in their lives. Could it be? Some Jews were beginning to believe but others were very skeptical.

For Gentile believers to take up an offering to help Jewish believers in poverty was a big deal. And I think Paul was really excited about it. This was an opportunity to break down walls and barriers between the two and open the doors to a new unity in Christian churches and gospel ministry. If Jews and Gentiles could unite in Christ it would be an extraordinary work of God.

So Paul went to the Gentile churches and told them of the need and invited them to participate in meeting it. He was confident that by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, they would respond and he could bring back a tremendous gift to Judea.

Now when it came to the church in Corinth, Paul had already told them about the need and invited them to take part about a year earlier. And they had responded as he hoped they would. They were eager to help. So when he wrote the letter of 1 Corinthians he gave them instructions about how they were to collect the offering. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 says, "*Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. ² On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. ³ And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.*"

He wanted them to take a collection over time, setting aside some of the surplus of their earnings from week to week as God saw fit to prosper them.

Then, when he made his way back to them again, the offering would be ready and it would go with him to Jerusalem.

The enthusiastic response of the Corinthian believers was very encouraging to Paul and he eagerly told the other churches about it, using them to inspire other Gentile churches to give and to prove to the Jewish churches that their love was genuine and God's Spirit really was living and working inside them.

But as you know, following the letter of 1 Corinthians, there was quite a bit of turmoil in the church of Corinth, especially in regard to Paul. False teachers were trying to turn the believers against him and the gospel. So Paul made an emergency visit which didn't go well. He then sent a severe letter with instructions about how to deal with one of his opponents. And he had only recently heard that they responded well and had sided with him, renewing their devotion to him and the gospel.

That was a huge relief for Paul and he was excited to get back to see them again, but he also wanted to address the issue of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem before he got there. They had shown a great desire to help at the beginning, but a lot had happened and now Paul wanted to make sure they followed through on what they had previously promised. Paul didn't want to be humiliated if he showed up and found out they hadn't taken the collection. Not only would that be a big hit for the struggling believers in Judea, but it would have given the Jewish skeptics a big reason to dig in their heels and doubt all the more that God's Spirit was actually working among the Gentiles.

So that's the situation surrounding these two chapters, and now as we read them, we can more accurately understand what Paul is saying, why he's saying it, and take away valuable principles that we can apply to our lives.

Paul starts by telling the Corinthian believers about the extraordinary response to the need for help by some other Gentile churches in Macedonia that he had just visited. He was doing this to reawaken their desire to help and remind them to follow through on what they had promised. They were an affluent church, especially compared to the churches in Macedonia, and their gift would help tremendously. Furthermore, Paul wanted to see them prove that their love and desire to help were genuine by following through.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1-7.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶ Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷ 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.

So you can see that Paul is calling them to follow through on giving to help the saints in Jerusalem. After just witnessing the act of grace that God did among the churches in Macedonia to move them to give generously despite their own poverty, Paul had urged Titus to go back to Corinth, carrying this letter, and complete that same work. He also was urging the Corinthians to excel in the grace of Christian giving, just as they excelled in all the other areas of grace God had given them.

Now I want to make a few additional comments here because it's easy for us to misunderstand what Paul is trying to do. Oftentimes when I read these verses I feel bad because it feels like Paul is saying: "Look at these Christians in Macedonia! Look at how they gave! That's what I want you to do! Give everything you have, even to the point of putting yourselves into poverty. That's the kind of giving that pleases God." I feel bad because I know that deep down, I'm not ready to give like that. I've got a family to support. I've got kids to feed. I've got bills to pay. I just can't do it. So it feels like I'm a failure and disappointment to God.

Well I don't think Paul was trying to do that in these verses and you'll see why as we go along. God clearly moved at that time in the hearts of the Christians in Macedonia so that they joyfully and eagerly wanted to give beyond their means. Paul refers to what happened as an outpouring of God's grace. The Macedonians were an extraordinary example of how God's grace can move in

a powerful way to compel people to give. But that kind of giving is beyond what God calls us to do in Christian giving. That was a particular prompting of the Holy Spirit that resulted in overwhelming generosity in their hearts. But what God expects of Christian giving in general is what Paul writes about later on in these chapters. He probably wanted to clarify that the Corinthians didn't have to give themselves into poverty like the Macedonians did. Honestly I'm not even sure Paul would have let the Macedonians give as much as they wanted to based on what he says later on. But the desire was there nonetheless, and Paul wanted to show that to the Corinthians so they would also want to complete what they had promised to do.

When we hear stories of radical Christian giving and sacrifice, I think we need to be careful to not make assumptions that if we don't give that same way, God will be disappointed in us. God doesn't want us to give out of guilt or obligation based on what someone else has done. He wants us to give joyfully in obedience to his Word (which we'll see in these chapters) and be open to the Holy Spirit if he moves us to give more than that. And if he does, one of the characteristics that will go along with that is joy, like we saw in the Macedonians, not discouragement and guilt.

The Corinthians had already shown the desire to give and Paul had already given them instructions on how to do that. Now, as he continues, he reminds them of why it is important that they complete that work.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:8-11.

I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹For 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. ¹⁰And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. ¹¹So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have.

He wanted them to complete the work – why? He says in verse 8, it was so they would prove their love was genuine. Here we get into some of the background stuff that I talked about earlier. Paul had boasted about the Corinthians and their desire to give to both Gentile and Jewish churches. To

Gentile churches he was using them as an example to follow. To Jewish churches he was using them to prove that God's Spirit was truly in them. So now he's calling on the Corinthians to follow through on their desire – prove that your love is genuine, meaning, that the Holy Spirit is actually in you, and God's grace is prompting you to give.

He reminds them of the love that Christ has shown us in verse 9 and what that compelled him to give. Even though he was rich in all the glories of heaven, he became poor by becoming one of us and dying on the cross. And he did that so that by his poverty we might become rich in all the spiritual blessings of salvation.

If his Spirit was in them, his love and generosity would bear fruit in their lives and they would follow through in generous giving. Not only would the desire be there, which they had expressed a year earlier, but the completion would be as well. That would prove their love was genuine and that Christ's love was in them. And Paul was eager for them to do that.

When it comes to Christian giving, there is desire and follow through. It starts with desire and that's the first sign that the grace of God is working in our hearts, but then it ends in follow through, which proves the desire is genuine. The follow through is necessary, because anyone can want to help when they hear about someone in desperate need, but if the Holy Spirit is behind it there will also be follow through. Now, unbelievers can follow through as well and that doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is in them, but when the Holy Spirit is in someone there won't just be desire, there will also be follow through. 1 John 3:17-18 says *“But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”* So follow through is critically important when it comes to Christian giving. Don't just say you want to help and leave it there, take the next step and actually give.

Do you have the desire to give to the work of the kingdom but keep pushing it off? What is the Spirit of God calling you to do? It may be time for you to turn that desire into obedience. Now in our day and age we have all kinds of desperate situations that come to our attention. God doesn't expect you to

give to everyone. I think we need to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us decide which needs to actually give to. But the point is that the desire needs to result in actual giving. We don't just want to help and do nothing about it.

Now we come to some very important verses, especially when it comes to clarity about how much God expects us to give. I've already hinted that he doesn't expect us to give ourselves into poverty, but how much should we give? Are we supposed to give 10% like the tithe in the OT? What if we can't give that much? What if we can give more? We'll start to see some answers in the following verses and more in the coming week.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:12-15.

For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

That closing quote comes from Exodus 16:18 and the idea Paul has in mind is that God supplies what we need. Some Israelites gathered a whole bunch of manna, and they needed all of it and there was none left over. Others gathered just a little, and it was just what they needed and didn't go without. God supplies what we need, and what Paul is pointing out in this passage is that sometimes he does that through other people in the church family.

In the situation in Corinth, they had abundance, but the Judean believers were in need. So Paul says that with the abundance God had given them, they were to help those who were in need. At a later time, the tables might turn, but for now it was their turn to help. Paul is very clear that God's will is that they give according to what they have, not what they don't have. God doesn't call you to ease other's burdens to the point where you are then burdened. You are to give of your abundance to supply their need.

We saw this in the instructions Paul had given in 1 Corinthians 16. They were to set aside a portion every week from the abundance God had given them. As

they prospered, they were to set some aside from the surplus. I have heard teaching about Christian giving that heavily stresses the aspect of sacrifice – to give more than what you think you are able and then trust God to meet your needs. And if you don't, you're lacking in faith and you're not being obedient in this area. But that contradicts what Paul taught in these verses and later on. Paul taught to give as you are able. Give according to your means. Be good stewards of God's money, set some aside, and excel in the grace of giving. Give as generously as you can. But you don't have to give yourself into poverty. Let that guilt go.

So that's one principle. Another is the principle of planned giving. We saw that in 1 Corinthians 16 as well – set aside a portion every week. It may be too big of a pill to swallow for you to open up your checkbook and give \$500 to help Gary Sandmann. Most of us probably wouldn't do that. But most of us could probably set aside \$10 a week and then be able to give \$500 a year from now and at that point, you could have a lot of joy in giving that gift instead of feeling guilty to have nothing to give.

“Give according to what you have” is what God's will is, and setting some money aside week after week is a practical strategy that will put you in a position to have a significant impact and the readiness and joy to do it.

I hope this is beginning to bring clarity and hope to this area of your Christian life. You may see that your understanding and practice of Christian giving is right on with these things. Keep it up. Or you might see that you're lagging behind and have been neglecting this area of obedience. I urge you to walk in obedience and begin to make this a regular part of your life. Maybe you've been carrying around some unnecessary guilt and need to let that go. I hope this passage helps. Guilt-free giving is what God's will is, and we'll see more next week.