

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia: ²During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, ⁴they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, ⁵and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will. ⁶So we urged Titus that just as he had begun, so he should also complete among you this act of grace.

⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love for us^[a]—excel also in this act of grace. ⁸I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love. ⁹For 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.

¹³It is not that there should be relief for others and hardship for you, but it is a question of equality.^[a] ¹⁴At the present time your surplus is available for their need, so that their abundance may in turn meet your need, in order that there may be equality. ¹⁵As it is written: **The person who had much did not have too much, and the person who had little did not have too little.**^[b]

Why Can't You Be More Like Your Brother?

Over time I think I've learned a thing or two about parenting. After 11 years I'm finally catching on. I've learned that berating children is not a beneficial means of motivation. Standing over a child shouting, "You'll never amount to anything!" just doesn't seem to work. Threatening them only makes them nervous and scared to do anything. Moreover if you congratulate one child at the expense of another with, "Why can't you be more like your brother?" one ends up with a big head, the other ends up depressed and unwilling to do anything. Let me be clear, I've never intentionally said these things in front of my children, which is why I wonder about those who use guilt, coercion, or mockery when it comes to motivating members of a church. I've seen churches guilt members into giving, "You have to dig deep and give more... or you don't have enough faith." During the lockdown, one televangelist said, "Don't you dare stop your tithe!" I've even heard pastors blame the people for their lack of faith, after they paid for a miracle that didn't come to fruition. It's because of this that people assume, "The church is only interested in money."

So what about Paul and how does this relate to our lesson? At first glance it almost looks like he's saying to the Corinthians, "Why can't you be more like your brother?!" But he's not. Nor is he wringing his hands in frustration rather he is full of joy and satisfaction. Paul invites us to understand money in the light of our brother: Jesus.

First let's take a look at the Corinthian's brother: the Macedonians. Luke introduced them to us in Acts chapter 16 and 17. Here Paul is guided by the Holy Spirit to Macedonia. His first experience in Philippi seems to set the standard of care for the rest of the trip. In Philippi after healing a demon possessed girl, he isn't welcomed and showered with praise, instead he's put in the stocks and thrown into jail. After Philippi he moved on to Thessalonica where a riot welcomed the apostle and the Christians, Jason and friends, were forced to post bond, guaranteeing that there wouldn't be another riot in the city because of them. If that wasn't enough Paul was smuggled out in the middle of the night to a small town off the beaten path, Berea. However, the persecution followed him there and Paul was sent from Macedonia to Achaia, the big city, where he preached in Athens at Mar's Hill and then later he headed to Corinth.

The Macedonians were the country bumpkins up north. They lived under heavy taxation, poverty, and persecution. They weren't rich or well off. Paul writes, "*During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.*" They were tough people. They were prime examples of those who should be receiving help not giving it but they gather an offering for the saints in Jerusalem

and Paul gives thanks to God. *We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia:* Paul isn't saying, "Why can't you be more like your brother?" He isn't even giving thanks to the Macedonians, He's pointing out the grace of God given to them. He's pointing out to the Corinthians that they're not alone. They are not the only beloved child of God. There are other brothers out there and they were looking out for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem.

Paul wanted to break down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles so he mentioned a famine in Jerusalem and the opportunity to support them. But he couldn't believe the response. *I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, ⁴ they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, ⁵ and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will.* They didn't need any urging from the apostle. They were the ones urging him. They were motivated by love, compassion, their connection to their brothers, and the gospel. They gave more than they could afford. They gave joyfully. If you want to know more about their relationship with Paul just read Philippians and compare it to the problem child, the Corinthians. The Macedonians gave generously to people they had never met and probably would never see. There is no guilt trip in any of this. Nor does Paul once mention money, just grace, service, fellowship, blessing, and manifestation of love. There is no command. But Paul is concerned that those in Corinth are in danger of greed and failing to express their faith and love for their brothers.

There are no commands for us to give a certain percentage. There are no membership fees, dues, or otherwise. Everything we bring should be a response of thanksgiving to the gospel, the grace of God. Because when you think about it, everything we have is a gift from God. We confess in the first article of the apostle's creed, *"I believe that God made me and all that exists, and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities. And I believe that God still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life. God also preserves me by defending me against all danger, guarding and protecting me from all evil. All this God does only because he is my good and merciful Father in heaven, and not because I have earned or deserved it."*

God provides. He has provided for us in the past and all the way up to this day. He promises that he will provide for us into the future. And yet we still struggle with the thought, "Do I have enough?" Often our hopes and fears are tied to the rise and fall of the stock market. Financial advisors teach us to focus on wealth accumulation and saving for the future. So we struggle with the idea of sacrificial giving. We may give half-heartedly or reluctantly not cheerfully. Our sinful nature still clings to each of us as we think, "What could I do with that?" By nature we cling to everything we have, we don't give freely. Selfishness comes naturally.

So does the desire for attention as people give greater honor towards those who give greatly. Which is why *Ananias and Sapphira*, serve as an example of what not to do with large gifts. They *decided they would gain a reputation for giving that they did not deserve* and they were severely punished. Paul says excel in this act of giving. It's not as if I'm without fault. I struggle with this same sin. I've been put to shame by those much worse off than me. The poverty stricken congregations of Macedonia gave generously, while the richer congregation Corinth was failing in this area. Generosity is a matter of faith and trust, not wealth. Generosity is not determined by how much wealth someone has. It's a matter of the heart, a matter of trust, a matter of faith.

That's why there are no threats of force. That's how the government works, but Paul emphasizes God's grace. This is a gift. *"For your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich"* (8:9). Rich not like the prosperity gospel preachers proclaim but rich eternally.

God's grace prompts and produces giving. The Macedonian churches are evidence of this. Out of their *poverty*, and *affliction* God's grace came and they had an *"abundance of joy"* that led to a *"wealth of generosity"* on their part. They gave

like their Lord who became their brother. Jesus is our brother in every way yet he is without sin. The writer to the Hebrews says of Jesus, “*For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame*” (Hebrews 12:2)

Paul writes, “*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.*” Paul points back to the life of Christ. Jesus became poor so that you might have life. He left behind the glories of heaven to live and die among us. He didn’t live in glory here on earth. He had no notion of the luxuries we now take for granted. He had no place to lay his head and he wandered from town to town relying on the love and mercy of God at work through the generosity of others.

And then he humbled himself to death even death on a cross. He was arrested, beaten, mocked, and crucified. He died a death he didn’t deserve. By his blood we have peace with God. By his death, we have eternal life. Jesus suffered the poverty of being forsaken by his Father so that we might enjoy the riches of his Father’s grace. We confess, “*He purchased us from all sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.*” Jesus showed us what generosity really is, when he gave to the greedy and ungrateful.

These Macedonians understood that everything they had belonged to God. They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to others as well. -- and when you give yourself you have given everything you have as well. Like the Corinthians you may have been greedy and selfish in the past. But you are forgiven. The Macedonians weren’t perfect either they too were forgiven. God’s grace, his generosity extends to you even if and when you struggle to trust that God will provide in the future.

Regardless of money, bank accounts, you are rich beyond measure. That is the economics of God’s grace. It’s still all about Jesus. His body, his blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. His baptism that connects us to him and makes us brothers. This leads not to privilege and power, but to freedom to serve others and put the well-being of the neighbor ahead of your own. How you do that depends on what God has given you and where you are at. Maybe you’ll tithe, maybe you won’t. It’s not taught in the New Testament. I feel like it does a disservice to those who give more than ten percent. But it is a good starting point.

It’s something that needs practice. Paul writes, “*Now as you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love for us^[a]—excel also in this act of grace.*” Exceling in sports doesn’t come without practice. Exceling in generosity doesn’t come naturally to us either. We must practice. Start small. Don’t worry about if someone is worthy or not. Give as God has given to you: freely. Certainly, don’t support someone’s drug habit. But you can give something more valuable than your money, your time, your talents – but the Word, the forgiveness of sins. You can share the eternal riches of peace with God. You’re stewards of God’s gifts. Give yourself first to the Lord and then also to others. And then give thanks to God for all that he has given you.

The question isn’t, “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” But, “You’ve been made like your brother. So maybe you won’t motivate your children through guilt or coercion. But our brother, Jesus, has made us just like him. When he generously forgave all our sins on the cross and through this act of grace he so enables us to live generously. Amen.