

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

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. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: they gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 6 So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 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.

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 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 through his poverty might become rich.

10 And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. 11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. 12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. 14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, 15 as it is written: 'The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.'

Today we are taking part in the Church of Scotland's National Gift Day. This is an initiative right across the Church of Scotland, as a way of trying to help congregations build back after Covid and give churches a much-needed boost after the last 18 months. Every congregation has been hit financially by Covid; none has been immune; this is a way of pulling together some resources for our congregation that will help us to build back church life in some way or another. There are still more questions than answers about what church life will look like in the months to come, but we work patiently and prayerfully to be the Church in our community and to be the church that God wants us to be.

The church in Corinth had been taking part in a collection: along with other churches they were collecting money for the Christians in Jerusalem, who were poor and struggling. The Corinthians had begun well, but it seems that they had stopped for some reason. Paul wants them to finish the task. It's really hard to talk about giving as a preacher without resorting to making people feel guilty that they're not giving enough. Paul inspires them to give in two ways: first of all, they have an example of the church in Macedonia; then they know the grace of Jesus – these two reasons are meant to inspire the Corinthian Christians to finish the job and complete their collection.

Corinth is in the south of Greece; Macedonia is in the North. The Macedonian Churches, in places like Philippi and Thessalonica, are examples to follow. But there are some surprises along the way. *"Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."* (verse 2) This is counter-intuitive; they are not behaving by what we'd expect. When people are suffering hard times and when they are poor, we expect them to draw themselves in; we expect people who are poor, to concentrate on their own survival. But these Macedonian Christians are behaving differently. They are struggling and they are poor, but when life is hard for them, their joy was overflowing and their generosity was rich, even in their extreme poverty. They gave as much as

they were able and even beyond; they saw giving as a privilege, as a way of sharing in service to other people who were in need. Their giving was first of all to the Lord, and then to others.

There is a word that inspires their giving: *“we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches” (verse 1)* Grace – the free, undeserved love of God to people in need. They had experienced grace, this generous love from God; the grace of God had been at work in their lives. That experience of grace had inspired them to give, to be generous. They received love from God and were inspired to give to help others in need. The grace of God inspiring other Christians is set to inspire the church in Corinth.

There is more to inspire the Christians in Corinth, as if the example of Christians in other places was not enough. *“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” (verse 9)* Here is another example of grace, in some ways the best reason for being generous, the self-giving of Jesus. What makes Jesus rich? He is the first-born Son of God; He is the One through whom and for whom the whole universe was created; He shares the unchanging glory of God, worthy of worship, honour and praise; He is King and Head of the Church, Lord of heaven and earth, the first and last of everything. There’s more than that, but that’s more than we can grasp already. Jesus is rich in glory and prestige. There is nothing here about money; the richness of Jesus is nothing financial, but is all about the glory of who He is; He is supreme!

But He gives all of that up and makes Himself poor: He comes into our world which in itself is poverty enough, but He comes born as a baby, born in a stable; He lives our life with all its pains and limitations; He suffers in all sorts of ways; He becomes a servant and washes the feet of His disciples; then He suffers and dies on the cross, doing what He came to do. Again, there is more that we can say, but you get the idea. This is Jesus making Himself poor, emptying Himself, sacrificing His glory and even sacrificing His life to become the Saviour of the world, to be our Saviour. He gave up all that made Him rich, the comfort and glory of heaven and became poor so that He could save us.

“You are rich!” Paul declares. The Christians in Corinth are rich because Jesus made Himself poor. They are rich in salvation; their sins are forgiven; they are reconciled with God, friends again, restored as part of the family; they have hope, even the hope that one day they will share the glory of God with Jesus, the hope that Jesus will come again. None of this is financial, but they are rich in faith and hope. Jesus has done all of this for them and has given these good things to them. They know all of this; they know the gospel in their heads; they know God’s grace in their hearts; they need to be reminded.

Now we come back to grace. Reading between the lines, we can see that there is a lot about the Christians in Corinth that doesn’t sit well: they love to form factions and fall out with each other; they take one another to court; they are slow to consider the poor and weak members of their church; they are selfish and fickle; they lack love and generosity. And yet, God has loved people like this. *“you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...”*; they have tasted grace. God has loved them in spite of all that they are; they have all the gifts of salvation, despite their faults and failings. They know grace, so Paul wants them to be inspired to give and be generous.

There are different motives for giving. There is guilt: preachers are very good at pressing that button, telling you that you don’t give enough and that you should always give more. Guilt is not a very good motivator; it wears off after a while because we have heard it so often and just feeling bad about something isn’t a great foundation for good deeds. We might give out of a sense of duty: we know

that we should give because it is what we do, or it is what we're told to do! So we make a contribution and sometimes even make sure that people see us make a contribution! Grace, on the other hand, inspires us to give because God has graced us and loved us; we respond to God's love by being kind and generous to others in the way that God has been kind and generous to us. We see a need and we respond. We give to the work of the church so that the whole community can be rich in faith and love; we give to the foodbank so that people who are struggling can be fed for a few days; we give to charity so that people in particular need can be helped, either at home or overseas, and can find the grace of Jesus for themselves. This is not about "how much"; this is about a deep and strong willingness to give, sensing the privilege of giving to God and to others in need.

Money is the focus of the National Gift Day, we encourage you to give what you are able to give. But there are other ways in which we give that will be just as important for the building back work of the Church after Covid. We give our time; we give our gifts and talents; we give our energy; and all of these are linked together. Since March 2020 we have got out of the way of so many opportunities to serve God and His Church; almost every avenue of Christian service within the church and beyond was closed off and because it has been closed for all of this time, we have got out of the way of service, out of the habit of giving time, talents and energy. We have sat back; we have become comfortable; we have used our time in different ways than before. We don't know what we will be able to build back in the life of our congregation; we have a big long list of activities that we shut down in March 2020, but how many of these activities will we pick up again? That will depend on lots of factors, one of which undoubtedly is "do we have people willing to give their time, talents and energy to God and His Church?"

Grace is inspirational. We have been loved by a kind and generous God; Jesus on the cross has shown us what grace is all about. In turn, we are inspired to be kind and generous in our giving. The Christians in Corinth were to be inspired to complete their giving project, inspired by God's grace at work in other churches, inspired by grace they have seen in Jesus and tasted from Him. Be inspired by the kindness and generosity of a gracious God; be inspired by Jesus who made Himself poor; be inspired by the richness of your salvation; be inspired by grace to be kind and generous in all your giving.