

The Gift of Giving - 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

In his letter to the Corinthian Christians, St Paul never once tells them to pay up. In fact, he explicitly avoids doing so – for instance, in verse 8 he says, “I say this *not as a command.*” Paul isn’t going to coerce Corinthian cash. He does, however, strongly *encourage* generous giving; and the first way he does so is by holding up the Macedonian churches as an instructive example.

Paul begins this section of his letter, verse 1,

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

Now, although we most often talk about the ‘grace of God’ in terms of our receipt of the free gift of salvation, the same word (χάρις) can also refer to *a spiritual gift* given to those who are already believers – the gift of teaching, the gift of tongues, the gift of healing, the gift of helps and so on. St Paul is excited to share with the Corinthian church news about a particular grace-gift recently given by God to the Macedonian churches. It is the gift of *giving*. Let’s read on:

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

The Macedonians’ generosity is patently supernatural. One might expect those who are secure and wealthy to be occasionally philanthropic, but the Macedonians were giving in the context of both their undergoing ‘a very severe trial’ (probably an outbreak of persecution) and their being in ‘extreme poverty.’ In spite of this situation their giving flowed out of an ‘overflowing joy.’ They gave, Paul goes on to say, according to and even *beyond* their means; and they did so without being asked and without any expectation being placed upon them (verse 5). In fact, they *begged* to be allowed to contribute financially to the collection (verse 4). The only explanation for their extraordinary behaviour is that God’s Spirit had moved their hearts and wills to give. God had given them the gift of giving.

Those who are familiar with Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians may recall that that church had a *glut* of spiritual sign-gifts. One couldn’t move for words of knowledge, signs of faith, tongues and interpretations. In fact, in that earlier letter, Paul had to instruct them how to bring the exercise of their spiritual gifts into good order, and had to remind them that *love* is the most important gift to pursue and practice. But in verse 7 of this chapter in 2 Corinthians, Paul urges them to seek the gift of *giving*:

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.

‘Grace of giving’ there translates the single word ‘grace’ (χάρις) in the Greek, and once again here it’s not a one-off action that Paul’s demanding they perform, but a disposition or *gift* he urges them to acquire. Paul doesn’t ask the Corinthians to copy the Macedonians’ behaviour. Rather, he suggests that they seek God’s *gift of giving*, so that then they might of their own accord be similarly supernaturally generous.

Now, I don’t know if you’ve ever prayed that God would give *you* a spiritual gift. Some will likely have prayed for the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy, the gift of healing and so on. But how often do people seek the gift of *giving*? Not often. Surely, though, like the Corinthians we too should seek this gift. We should ask God by his Spirit to give us a heart so generous – so captivated by God’s grace – that we give joyfully even in spite of our own problems in life and the financial pressures we ourselves feel – including those caused by the pandemic, that we give right up to the limits of our ability, that we *want* to give even when it isn’t necessarily expected of us.

Though the coronavirus pandemic has felt like a ‘very severe trial,’ we know it won’t compare to the experience of persecution faced by first century Christians (nor by twenty-first century Christians

elsewhere in the world). And though our personal finances and those of our parish churches have come under considerable strain as a result of the lockdown, we know it won't compare to the 'extreme poverty' faced by those Macedonian believers (nor again, by our brothers and sisters in the third world). Nevertheless, COVID has created a situation for us in which resembles, to a degree, the Macedonian experience of a grave social and financial trials: the sort of situation in which we could only be moved to generous, sacrificial giving by supernatural agency. But it is that agency – the gifting of the Spirit – that St Paul is so thrilled by and wishes to stir up in the Corinthian church.

Might we pray, during this Call to Prayer, for God to give us this gift – the gift of giving? A dangerous prayer to pray: do you dare? Do I?

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