

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (The Meaning of Offering I)

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Key Verse: 8:9

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

Today's passage teaches us the meaning of offering, especially relief offering. There had been a severe famine in the land, and believers in Jerusalem were suffering. Paul was collecting an offering from all Gentile churches to give to the Jerusalem Church. His purpose was to build spiritual unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Ro 15:26-27). It was part of the ministry of reconciliation. The Corinthians had begun to gather an offering. However, they did not follow through on giving it. So Paul, after reconciling with them, encouraged them to finish the task. In doing so, Paul explained the meaning of offering in relation to the grace of Jesus. Today let's learn how to offer meaningfully in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First, the grace God had given to the Macedonian churches (1-5).

Look at verse 1. "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." Paul began, not by talking directly about the offering, but by sharing an example. Why? It is because a good example may best move others' hearts and stir their spiritual desire to do good work. It is interesting to observe crabs. They do not move forward, but always from side to side. One day a mother crab told her baby crab, "Don't walk from side to side, walk forward in a straight line." The baby crab responded, "Show me the example." The mother crab became speechless. It is not easy to set a good example. Yet the Macedonian churches, including the Philippians, Thessalonians, and Bereans had done so.

What was the grace that God had given the Macedonian churches? Look at verse 2. "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." Usually when people confront severe trials and extreme poverty, their hearts become dark and they complain out of anxiety, thinking only about their own situation. They turn indifferent, thinking this is normal. They even cultivate a "beggar's mentality." When they see only themselves and their situation, they lose their faith. But the Macedonian believers were different. They had overflowing joy in the most severe trial. In extreme poverty,

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they made a generous offering. They gave no impression of being beggars, or even poor. Rather, they seemed to be rich, while experiencing extreme poverty.

How was this possible? It was because they experienced the grace of God. That is why Paul talked about the grace God had given them. Here "grace" is to receive something that we don't deserve. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us and forgave all our sins and made us precious children of God (Ro 5:8). That is the real meaning of grace. When the Macedonian churches received the grace of forgiveness they experienced the love of God who did not spare his one and only Son, but gave him up as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Then they could participate in the offering generously out of overflowing joy. It was not from their human effort, but the working of the grace of God in them, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. That is why Paul called their offering grace.

We find another example of such giving. Exodus 35-36 beautifully portray the Israelites bringing a generous offering to build the tabernacle. All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold and jewelry of all kinds--rings and earrings--and blue and purple yarn and fine linen and even goat hair and ram skins dyed red and the hides of sea cows. Finally Moses had to pronounce that it was enough, and to stop bringing offerings (36:5-7). How was it possible? It was because they experienced God's forgiving love. When they were suffering under the power of Pharaoh, God had mercy on them and brought them out of Egypt to the promised land. God made a covenant with them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19). For this, they needed discipline. So God gave them the Ten Commandments through Moses. However, while Moses was on the mountain for forty days receiving God's word, they became impatient. They forgot God's grace. They made a golden calf and worshiped it, and indulged in pagan revelry. God's anger burned against them. At that moment, Moses prayed earnestly for them, asking God to forgive them--or if not, to remove his name from the book of life. God heard Moses' prayer and forgave their sins. Afterward, God asked them to build a tabernacle. They offered materials generously out of joy and gratitude because they had experienced God's forgiving love. God's forgiving love moves us to offer generously, even in difficult times. Christian offering is different than human philanthropy. It is offered to God out of gratitude for his grace, not merely to men.

Verses 3-5 reveal the attitude of the Macedonian believers. We can find three distinctive characteristics. **In the first place, they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability (3).** They did not calculate the minimum and

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offer grudgingly. They gave generously. No one forced them. It was done out of a willing decision. That is why their joy overflowed.

In the second place, they urgently pleaded for the privilege of sharing in the service of the saints (4). We often see fundraisers plead for donations. But in this case, the Macedonians pleaded for the privilege of giving. In verse 4, we see that offering is not only for God, but also to share fellowship with others. For the Purdue Conference, many willingly supported travel expenses of foreign delegates. Loop Fellowship coworkers offered \$735 to support Mexican delegates' airfare. UIC coworkers raised money through yard and candy sales and offered more than \$2,200 for M. Point Levitsky from Turkey. NEIU coworkers held car washes and offered \$1,400 for M. Efrain Atanacio from Peru. NU coworkers held bake and grill events and yard sales and offered \$1,300 for Argentine delegates. Loyola coworkers offered over \$8,000 for Nigerian delegates. They considered it a privilege to share in this service to the saints. That is one reason God blessed the Purdue Conference.

In the third place, they gave themselves first to the Lord (5). In the matter of offering, what God wants is not money, but ourselves. God wants us to have a personal relationship with him through offering. Once David Livingstone was moved by the word of God. He wanted to offer something to God, but he did not have money. When the offering basket came to him, he stood up and said, "Lord, I do not have anything to offer except my own body. Please take me as an offering." Later he gave his life as a missionary to Africa. Offering is not just about money. It is giving ourselves: our hearts, our labor, our time to God. Professors can offer some of their intelligence to God by giving lectures to God's children free of charge. Out of each 24 hours in a day, we can set aside 10%, or 2 and 2½ hours, to share the gospel through outreach and one-to-one Bible study. Dr. Joe Schafer offered his sabbatical year to God as a missionary to Australia. Pauline Park Jr. and Suzie Hong offered their golden time after graduation to go to Colombia and Sri Lanka respectively as short term missionaries. It is good for college grads to offer a year to God as short term missionaries. Surely God blesses those who do so.

Second, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (6-9).

Look at verse 6. "So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part." Paul was inspired by the example of the Macedonian churches so he reminded the Corinthians of their earlier pledge. It is not unusual for people to make pledges to give to God when their hearts are moved. However, making a pledge is one thing and giving the

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money is another thing. John Wesley often said, "I cannot believe your repentance until your wallet repents." Look at verse 7. "But just as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving." The Corinthian believers excelled in many areas. Now Paul asked them to excel in the grace of giving as well. There was a possibility that Corinthian believers might have been influenced by Greek philosophy. In Greek philosophy they regarded spiritual things as good and precious, but material things as evil and worthless. So they didn't regard offerings as part of spiritual activity. They might have boasted about their faith and knowledge, but looked down on material giving. However, Paul put the same value on material giving that he put on other spiritual activities. Material giving is part of spiritual life. We should strive to offer material to God as much as we strive to excel in faith and knowledge. It is part of our life of faith. So Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:21).

In verse 8 Paul said he was not commanding them, but wanted to test the sincerity of their love through offering. So here we can see that our love or sincerity can be tested through our offering. After sharing with them the grace that God had given the Macedonian churches, Paul reminded them of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's read verse 9. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." Jesus Christ is the source of grace (Ro 1:5). Our Lord Jesus Christ is also the model of grace. We have to learn the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in order to excel in all areas of Christian life, including offering. In verse 9, we can learn three things about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the first place, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ comes from giving up his right and privilege as the Creator God. John 1:3 says, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." This verse tells us that Jesus is the Creator God. He is the Owner of all things. In heaven, he enjoyed honor and glory and praise from all creatures. However, he came down to this world as a human being, taking the very nature of a man. He was born in a manger, an animal's feed box (Lk 2:7). He grew up in a poor family in an oppressed nation (Isa 53:2). During his ministry he had no place to lay his head, even though birds of the air have nests (Lk 9:58). He gave up all his rights and privileges as God and made himself nothing for our sake (Php 2:6-8). People never want to give up their rights and privileges. They want to enjoy them to the maximum degree forever. However, grace does not come from such people. Grace comes through those who give up rights and privileges. When Mother Barry went to Korea as a missionary, she gave up her princess lifestyle in Mississippi and even her dream of marriage.

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At that time the situation in Korea was very poor. But Mother Barry did not live in the American missionary compound. She moved into a Korean house and lived just like an ordinary Korean. Through her life of poverty, Korean young people became rich. Dr. Samuel Yoo could live a wealthy life in the United States, perhaps as a professor in medical school. He could send his children to the best schools and provide an abundant material life for them. But he sacrificed such rights and privileges to go to Uganda to serve people there. He treated all kinds of people with all kinds of problems. Once, he accidentally poked himself with a needle that had been used on an AIDS patient. He could have died of AIDS. He was willing to do this because he is following Jesus, the Word who became flesh, in order to save us.

In the second place, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ comes from his humility and service. In the world there is no grace because people do not want to serve others, but to be served by others. But in Jesus Christ there is grace. Although he was the Son of God, he came into the world not to be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45). He served all kinds of people. He served selfish people such as Matthew. He served proud people such as Nicodemus. He served wayward people like the Samaritan woman. He served powerless people like the paralytic. He served angry and rebellious people like the demon-possessed man. He served ambitious people like his disciples. He served them with the love of God, prayer, and the word of God until they were changed into new persons.

In the third place, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ comes from his total sacrifice on the cross for our sins. His sacrifice was a ransom sacrifice for our sins. There is no grace where people only talk about grace. But there is true grace where there is sacrifice.

Then what blessings do we receive through the grace of Jesus? In the past our lives were miserable because of our sins. Even if we had great wealth or tremendous abilities or many friends, we were miserable in our inner lives. We had no peace or joy, but only strife, guilt, anxiety, sorrow, and fear of death. Many were miserable because they had no meaning of existence and no clear direction. This drives some rich young people to attempt suicide. However, through Jesus we can receive the grace of forgiveness. All of our sins are forgiven. We have real joy and peace. Jesus also gives us a clear mission. Mission gives our lives absolute meaning and purpose. Mission makes us fruitful and glorious. We live under God's protection and enjoy his provision. In addition to all this, we inherit the kingdom of God as heirs of God. All these blessings come from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you Jesus for your marvelous grace!

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When we know this grace, it transforms our lives. We become rich and generous and willing to share, and willing to serve, and willing to offer. We do so, not out of obligation, but willingly from our hearts and joyfully. This gives the Christian offering its unique quality that sets it apart from mere human philanthropy.

Third, the Biblical meaning of offering (10-15).

Until now Paul had explained the meaning sufficiently to inspire the Corinthians to offer with a right heart and attitude. Now he advises them to finish the work according to their earlier pledge (10). Paul encouraged them to offer willingly (11-12). God accepts the willing offering according to what one has. No offering is too small in the sight of God if it is given sacrificially. For example, a poor widow offered two very small copper coins while others offered bundles of money. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others" (Mk 12:41-43).

Paul further explained the meaning of the offering to preempt any misunderstanding. Look at verse 13. "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality." What does "equality" mean? Look at verses 14-15. "At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.'" Christians work hard and live humbly. So it is natural to accumulate a surplus of materials. But we should not use this to indulge in luxury. We should give to others who are in need. Later, when we are in need, those who have plenty will share with us. This is equality. This equality is not forced, as in the Communist system. It is established voluntarily out of love. Basically it comes from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We should not put our hope in wealth or become arrogant due to wealth. We must be generous and willing to share with others who are in need. In this way we can lay up treasure for ourselves as a firm foundation for our life (1 Ti 6:17-19).

Let's read verse 9 one more time: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is marvelous. We know this grace and have experienced and tasted this grace. But from time to time we easily forget this grace. Then we become stingy in offering to God and miserable. When we remember the grace of Jesus, we can offer ourselves

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to God, and share with others joyfully and willingly. Let's remember the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.