

FOR YOU KNOW THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15

Key Verse: 8:9

“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 by his poverty might become rich.”

How would you define rich or poor? For some folks, it's obvious: It's all about the money—how much do you have, what can you buy, how much can you give? But as we reflect on it, rich and poor have a deeper meaning. People with lots of money and expensive properties tend to have souls that are impoverished. And those living a hand-to-mouth existence, with no possessions to speak of, often seem like the richest people in the world (6:10; cf. Lk1:53; 12:21). Which kind of person do you want to be? And how can we be the spiritually rich kind? In today's passage Paul explains that we become truly rich by knowing “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” What does that mean? And how does his grace change us? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul's main theme is the ministry of reconciliation (5:18). It's a ministry of grace (1:12,15; 4:15; 6:1; 8:1,6,7,9,19; 9:8,14; 12:9; 13:14). In the grace of God, Paul is working to restore his relationship with the Corinthians. In chapters 8 and 9 he turns to an important topic. He wants them to “complete” their offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem (8:6,11). He's been working on raising this offering for several years. He plans on taking it in person to Jerusalem (Ro15:25–28,31), along with several Gentile converts (Ac20:4), despite the misunderstandings it might cause (Ac21:28).

Why is Paul raising such a world-wide offering? He's aware of the ministries throughout the Roman Empire. The gospel of Jesus had begun in Jerusalem, spread to all Judea and Samaria, and through Paul, it advanced all over the Mediterranean world. But there was a danger the church would split due to its cultural division between Jews and Gentiles. So Paul is urging Gentile believers to give an offering for the poor among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Elsewhere he writes, “For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings” (Ro15:27). Paul wants these Gentiles, through their giving, to show deep gratitude for Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He's convinced that their graciousness in Christ will cause the saints in Jerusalem to be overflowing in thanksgiving for them, to

the glory of God (4:15; 9:11–12). So, raising this offering is about more than meeting a need; it's about building spiritual unity that glorifies God (Ro15:6). How then does Paul inspire people to offer for this cause?

I. An example of giving (8:1–5)

To encourage the Corinthians, Paul describes the good example of the Macedonian churches. Paul himself had started those churches on his second missionary journey (Ac16:9–10). Now, at the end of his third missionary journey, he's back in Macedonia (2:13; 7:5), writing 2 Corinthians from there. Because he's there in person, he writes, "I can testify" (3) about them.

Look at 8:1. Paul says their giving is "the grace of God that has been given." In other words, *God gave* them the grace to give. Why does Paul say their giving is the result of "the grace of God"? Read verse 2. We wonder what their "severe test of affliction" was. Most likely, it wasn't health problems, but persecution for their faith (2Th1:4). When they confessed their faith in Jesus, unbelievers cast them out, and these new Macedonian believers lost their jobs. Thus they were experiencing "extreme poverty." They could relate to the believers in Jerusalem, who also were suffering due to persecution (1Th2:14). Being so poor, the actual amount they gave probably wasn't much. But Paul, writing from their point of view, calls it "a wealth of generosity." It reminds us of the two small copper coins a poor widow gave at the temple, which amounted to just a penny. Though many rich people were offering large sums, Jesus said the poor widow put in *more* than them, because "she out of her poverty put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mk12:41–44). The point is not the amount, but the wholehearted spirit in the giving. Only God's grace can inspire *that* kind of giving. It tells us that authentic Christian giving isn't like a business; it's spiritual.

Read verses 3–4. It's stunning. These people are so poor, but they volunteered. In fact, Paul says they "begged earnestly" to do it. Who *begs earnestly* to give an offering? It says they considered it a "favor." In Greek, this word is literally "grace." What an attitude in giving! Some people give as if they're doing somebody a great favor. Some are burdened. But these people considered giving a *privilege*, a *grace*! Look at verse 5. Paul means they weren't trying to curry favor with him; they gave themselves "first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us." It was godly, God-centered giving. To learn healthy giving, we need a good example. The best example of giving is when it's inspired by the grace of God.

II. "This act of grace" (8:6–9:5)

Read verses 6–7. Paul is sending Titus back to Corinth again, to “finish what he started.” One year before this, Titus had been in Corinth, suggesting that they join in this offering (8:10). And initially, the Corinthians had responded by being zealous to offer; in fact, Paul had been telling the Macedonians about their zeal (9:2). At the end of 1 Corinthians he’d already given them specific instructions on how to save up gradually for this special offering (1Co16:1–3). But somehow, they had not followed through. Paul says here that they “excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you,” but he urges them to “excel in this act of grace also” (8:6). Three times in this passage Paul uses the expression “this act of grace” (8:6,7,19). It’s the key to the whole passage. Paul is not commanding them, but wanting them to give willingly, out of genuine love. Only when we receive God’s grace can we give out of such love.

So Paul points to the ultimate act of grace. Read verse 9. When we read this verse, we may wonder, “When was Jesus rich?” In fact, he was born in a manger. He grew up the son of a carpenter. During his ministry he had no place to lay his head. The religious leaders of the day, the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, couldn’t see past his poverty and were ridiculing him (Lk16:14). In the end, he died naked on a shameful cross. But the night before, he prayed, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (Jn17:5). Though he was despised and rejected, Jesus the Son had glory with God the Father for all eternity. Through him all things were made (Jn1:3). But he became flesh and made his dwelling among us (Jn1:14). He took on our human limits. He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Php2:8), where he poured out all his blood. It’s how he “became poor.”

How did his act of grace make us rich? Through his suffering, death, and shed blood for our sin, he gives us the grace of forgiveness. Knowing this grace of forgiveness makes us truly rich. It reconciles us to God and fills us with his great love. With God as our loving Father, we feel abundantly rich and secure. His grace makes us rich enough to forgive the worst sins, even our worst enemies. His grace fills us with real joy, a joy that no amount of possessions could ever give. His grace enables us to love people lavishly with the love of God. His grace inspires us to be givers instead of takers. Forgiving, loving, joyful, generous—that’s spiritually rich.

Some people have impoverished minds. Even though they have so much, they calculate and conclude they have to be stingy. They think they’re smart. They’re trying to hold on to something. But they’re not free. Our Lord Jesus taught, again and again, to give (Mt5:42; 6:2–3; 10:8b; 19:21), even “expecting nothing in return” (Lk6:35). How can we be such givers? It’s only when we know his grace. His grace is so great that when

we know it, we realize we already have everything. Later, Paul shares what the Risen Lord Jesus told him: “My grace is sufficient for you” (12:9). What amazing words! What more could we ever need or want but his grace? His grace loosens our tight grip on things we’re holding onto. In verses 11–12 Paul teaches a healthy boundary: to give according to what we have, not with unreasonable or irresponsible ideas. In verses 13–15 he adds that our giving is not to burden some people and make others rich, but to bring fairness.

But the main thing to think about here is, why give? If we give to church, what motivates us? Some make church offerings for tax purposes. Some give only to causes they like, only if there’s a real need. Some think it’s a church rule we should follow strictly, a holy duty, like “paying our dues.” Some give offerings to get rid of guilt, or hoping God will give them some reward. Some give with mixed motives, to help, but also to outdo others, to boost their own reputation and feel good about themselves. But Paul is telling us to give simply and purely because of the grace of Jesus. It’s not bad to set up autopay to make our offerings. But there’s a danger our hearts will be checked out. For our giving to be an act of grace, our heart filled with grace has to be engaged. Because of his grace we give often, and more than necessary; we give eagerly, willingly, generously, abundantly, humbly.

III. The cheerful giver (9:6–15)

In this last part Paul shares a few more spiritual principles for giving. Paul inspires us with the faith to give “bountifully” (9:6). Again he says, “not reluctantly or under compulsion”; then he adds some now famous words: “for God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7). Does God need our offering? Of course not. God can do whatever he wants without anything from us. He doesn’t need or want our money; he wants our hearts. Why do we give to him gladly, cheerfully? It’s simply out of love for him. Then Paul adds a wonderful promise of God, that when we give, “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work” (9:8). In other words, we don’t have to worry we’ll run out and be left high and dry. God will supply and multiply what we need and make us “enriched in every way to be generous in every way” (9:10–11). Giving, relying on God’s grace, is at the core of practical Christian living.

Look at 9:12–14. Paul sees the larger meaning of this world mission offering. It will cause the poor saints in Jerusalem who receive it to be “overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.” They will see these Gentiles’ “submission that comes from [their] confession of the gospel of Christ.” What’s more, instead of ignoring or despising them, they will long for these Gentile believers and pray for them “because of the surpassing

grace of God” upon them. Once again, we see Paul’s vision for this offering to build real spiritual unity.

Let’s read our key verse again. May God help us know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that makes us spiritually rich. May God newly inspire us to give as an act of grace, cheerfully and wholeheartedly, holding nothing back. May God use our world mission offerings for his glory, especially to build spiritual unity among God’s people all over the world.