

2 Corinthians 8-9

Chapter 8

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9 Grace of Christ
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15 As it is written [grace]
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Glory to God

Chapter 9

1-5 Corinthians > Macedonians
Finish the task
6-8 Plenty-supply
9 As it is written [grace]
9-11 Plenty-supply
11-15 Thanks to God
Glory to God, Gospel of Christ
Thanks be to God, indescribable gift

8:24 – Therefore show these men the proof of your love
and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

Read chapter 8:1-9

You'll have preached on this and heard it preached many times I'm sure.

It's often taught to give a healthy gospel framework for giving – because this is probably the most sustained, theologically thorough and persuasive treatment of giving in the Bible.

It's often taught when there just so happens to be a church building project or church giving has stagnating – and you can understand that – it starts with a picture of people pleading for the privilege of giving – who wouldn't want to see that in their church?

But what I want to do now is not a full exposition but give an overview and some lines of application particularly in relation to church planting – and I think we'll find many of them are counter-intuitive and counter-cultural.

I've given an outline of chapters 8 and 9 on the handout

You can see there is a lot of similarity between chapter 8 and chapter 9 and there's this central verse at the end of chapter 8 gives us a big clue to what is going on and what this is all about:

²⁴Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

So 'these men' = Titus and two anonymous brothers who are great gospel guys – and they are being sent on ahead of Paul with this letter. They are the advanced party to carry the letter and to help the Corinthians get the financial gift ready for when Paul arrives with some others and then they'll collect the gift and Paul and the brothers, will take the gift to Jerusalem.

So in chapter 9 Paul says:

³But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. ⁴For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. ⁵So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready...

So you get the picture – Paul has been bigging up the Corinthians and he’s saying Don’t disappoint – live up to your billing.

And at the same time this is a proof of your love – which fits into the logic of the letter because Paul has been talking in chapters 6 and 7 about gospel response: not receiving the grace of God in vain (6:1), perfecting holiness out of reverence for God (7:1), godly sorrow leading to eagerness (7:11) – and then chapters 8 and 9 are all about that gospel response, about their repentance proving genuine, there’s loads of eagerness language.

So the helpful thing there is that holiness and repentance are not just negative – you could read chapters 6 & 7 and think it’s just about being separate from unclean stuff – but it’s also positive – it’s love expressed in generous giving.

A healthy, holy church is a giving church.

So – some lines of application for us:

1. Comparison is not always bad: be inspired by other churches

Verse 1: And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

A lot of this is playing off the Macedonians and the Corinthians. So beginning of chapter 8 Paul boasts about the Macedonians. Then he says v8:

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

Then the beginning of chapter 9 he says he’s been boasting to the Macedonians about the Corinthians – v2:

² For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.

So Paul is boasting about one church or group of churches in one place to inspire and stir up and raise the game of another church or group of churches in another area.

It’s interesting in terms of fundraising technique – Paul doesn’t tell stories of need (that’s how secular fundraising works – tell stories of starving children) but he does tell stories of giving.

Comparing your church to other churches is not always bad.

Comparison can be bad – it can be a great trap particularly in church planting. Your plant is growing more than mine. I should be rejoicing but I’m tempted to feel depressed or annoyed and to find reasons why that’s unfair.

But there is a good sort of comparison. Gary Millar says on this passage,

“We should be asking constantly, in every situation: “What can I learn from [that church]?” City churches should look at [rural] churches and ask themselves: “What have we to learn?” [We should look at churches in different cultures] and ask: “What have they got that we haven’t?”

“Where do they live and speak the gospel in ways that we don’t?” Reformed churches should look at charismatic churches, credobaptists should look at paedobaptists and vice-versa and ask: “What can we learn?” It’s so anti-gospel to act as if we have all the answers.”

Paul says: we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.

What was that particular grace?

2. Gospel giving is not just prudent: it is paradoxical, prodigal, present-focused and people-dependent

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.

This is paradoxical giving – it isn’t out of plenty, it’s out of poverty – extreme poverty. There’s been this theme all through 2 Corinthians – ministering out of weakness – comfort in affliction, sufficiency in insufficiency, life in death, joy in sorrow. It’s the paradox of the gospel:

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.

We expect it to say ‘out of his riches’ – and that’s true – but here it’s out of his extreme poverty that the gift comes – and that’s a pattern the Macedonians fit.

It’s prodigal giving – in the sense of extravagant, reckless – willing to give everything:

Repetition throughout this section of generosity language, rich generosity, liberal gift, Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.

It’s present-focused – chapter 8 verse 14:

¹⁴ At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.

And it’s people-dependent - see that in the same verse:

your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.

What strikes me here is how counter-cultural this is in a Western context.¹

Westerners value prudence and careful stewardship of money – and that’s important and it’s there in this passage:

¹ African Friends and Money Matters book is helpful on this. Generalisations but useful in showing there are very different ways of thinking about money.

²⁰ We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift.

But it is a liberal gift. Easily prudence can be a smokescreen for stinginess.

What you find in a lot of non-western cultures.

- Willingness to give beyond means
- A greater concern to be generous than to be careful
- A focus on present need rather than future need
- And a willingness to depend on other people. In western cultures we tend to want to trust in systems rather than people.² We trust in savings and insurance and the NHS and pension schemes rather than when I'm sick I ask you for help with my bill, when you've got a need you'll come to me

I'm not trying to say one culture has got it completely right but I think a lot of non-western cultures are closer to this passage than I naturally am.

To western culture it looks mad to give like this.

I'm not saying don't worry about budgeting for ourselves or our churches.

I'm not saying we don't make any plans and provision for the future.

But we certainly shouldn't be hoarders.³

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."¹⁵

The manna came daily. If you tried to hoard it during the week, it got worms in it.

Every day there'd be a gathering and a distribution so that those who'd managed to pick up more shared with those who'd only managed to pick up a bit so that everyone had enough today.

Three quick suggestions:

- Find a good, competent treasurer but also one who is willing to spend, who's willing to give, who isn't wanting just to keep the purse closed and growing bigger, who wants to see resources put to good gospel use not sitting in a bank account.
- Seek interdependency not just independence - it's good to be sustainable and not just supported by one mother church – but the end goal is churches giving and receiving resources, people, meeting each other's needs.
- Be willing to take risks. What is being commended here looks mad, from a modern, Western, financial planning point of view. Are we willing to take risks as churches, give extravagantly – knowing that God loves that far more than the super careful church sitting on a massive bank balance.

3. Gospel giving is not just for our church: the real miracle is giving to other churches

⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

Chapter 9:1 There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people.

² That's why there are traffic lights. Whereas in a lot of countries you have a glorious snarl up at every junction and people get out of cars and buses and help each other through.

³ Randy Alcorn is helpful on this – it's good to be like the ant which gathers in summer for the winter but don't gather for 20 winters.

As I'm sure you know – these chapters are not about giving to your local church. This is about the mainly gentile churches expressing their love and solidarity with the mainly Jewish church in Jerusalem.

This is really challenging I think. A congregation giving to support their pastor and the ministry of their local church is good and right – but these chapters are about famine relief for a church hundreds of miles away.

This is more like Barnabas Fund and Open Doors are doing at the moment supporting the material needs of churches in Syria.

This idea of giving away from your church is huge. Especially for a church plant where you need every pound.

Acts 29 asks all of the plants that sign up with them to commit to tithing their finances – giving away 10% to other churches. To get into the DNA from the beginning that we are generous as a church to other churches.

And not just churches nearby who we can build a strong link with – churches in Scotland – 20Schemes – or churches in Nigeria or Egypt.

Actually sending them cash:

4. Love is not just words: it involves transfers of cash

Chapter 8

¹¹ Now finish the work,

Chapter 9

⁵ So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised.

First reading I think of my experience in Kenya where there was often a church fundraiser and lots of pledges came in – read out the total of the pledges – but I know only 60% of what has been promised will come in.

But then I thought in Western culture we can also be loving only in words.

I can say that our church is really passionate about reaching people on the estate, really passionate about children's ministry, really passionate about unreached people groups, really passionate about training leaders, really passionate about diversity – but if we don't actually put cash into those things then it's often just words.

Non-Western cultures is that they're often very aware of the power of money and they see sending money as a key way to love people. Sometimes that goes too far and it becomes the only way. But I think in Western cultures we're too much the other way – we're happy to offer people a conversation or training or anything but money.

But what's the motor for all this?

5. The gospel is not just the shape or starting point for giving: it is all grace from first to last

I know we know that but I think there's more in these chapters on this that at first glance and it's deeper and more present tense than I thought.

² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy

That's got to be a very powerful present tense joy – in what?

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.

How exactly did Christ become poor? How exactly did we become rich?

He became poor in God-forsakenness – this is about the Cross where he lost the experience of the love of the Father – which was to go through hell. Though from all eternity he had experienced the riches of the embrace of the Father, he was cast out into the darkness - so that we would be brought in to know the embrace of the Father.

That's what it is to be rich – to be a child of God, with the Spirit of God who cries out Abba Father and has the love of the Father lavished on us.

So this is an event – 'he became poor' – that happened – but we are now in a state of being rich in communion with the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit.

Present tense to that.

Chapter 9:7

God loves a cheerful giver.

Then it talks about the abundant blessing of God -

⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written:

It should say there "He has freely scattered, His righteousness endures for ever" – I think Paul is doing what the apostles almost always do when they read the Psalms – they read them as Psalms of Christ. Christ is the true righteous man who gives, freely to the poor – to us.

¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion

It's all grace – it's all top down. Like the manna raining out of the sky.

A giving church will be a church that is deeply soaked in this grace and experiencing this grace – not just that God has saved us by grace but right now he is gracious to us, loving us, giving us stuff so that we can be channels of grace to others.

We tend to think it's a zero sum game on the church budget – we give, we have less – no – God is like a fire hydrant – giving, giving and we need to see that and be part of that.

Finally:

6. Gospel giving does not produce control: it produces thanks and glory to God

Chapter 9

¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

One of the big fundraising strategies is give stories of impact – which is more positive than need. And this is about impact but not stories of how Jerusalem Christians are going to be able to get back on their feet.

It's hearts going out to you but most of all its thanksgiving to God.

Logic: Gospel of Christ → Joy → Giving → Thanks → Glory to God.

Giving can often be linked to control – in the ancient world and today – it often sets up a patronage situation where the patron calls the shots. But here there is giving with no strings attached. Thanks goes not so much to the givers but to the God of grace who has given the funds in the first place and then given the grace to people to send them. And that reminds people that he is the God of grace – who gave his Son.

¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Amen.

- Support raising 101 <https://londonplantingacademy.org/courses/support-raising-101/>
- David Maranz, African Friends and Money Matters. Summary: <https://www.ugandamission.net/ministry/money/image/70obs.pdf>
- Randy Alcorn, Money, Possessions and Eternity. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Money-Possessions-Eternity-Randy-Alcorn/dp/0842353607>