**The grace of giving** 13/2/22 dkm

Read: Deuteronomy 15:1-12, 2Corinthians 8

Text: 2Corinthians 8:1-15

Psalms: 100old, 73:1-8 &17-20, 15, 117

I find it interesting to see various religious groups setting up charities to help people in need. Is it in the nature of men and women to give sacrificially to the poor? Maybe so before the Fall, but not since sin entered the world. Sin brought pride and selfishness to the human heart. Sinners are proud, ‘me-first’ people. Sin lets rich people live next door to poor people and do nothing to relieve their poverty. The picture of poor Lazarus ‘laid at the gate’ of a rich man, is a picture from India and many societies today. While Hindus practice almsgiving, they see poverty as ‘karma’, as a curse of the gods. Their almsgiving, like the giving of many in our society, is seen as a good work, as earning merit, or making one feel good (cf. Matt 6:1-4).

In the story of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus implicitly condemns the rich man for his selfishness and his failure to help poor Lazarus. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus explicitly teaches the importance of helping a neighbour, even when the neighbour is not family or a member of the same social or religious group. Most human beings help their own families, but not many are generous towards people outside their family; some do not even help their own families. By ‘generous’ I mean giving till it hurts, or sacrificial giving, something beyond almsgiving.

Jesus praised the poor widow giving all that she had, even though it was just two copper coins (Mark 12:42). The first Christians were eager to share all they had with poor members of the fellowship of believers. The apostle Paul taught the importance of this fellowship of believers, and of material sharing within this fellowship. He even teaches us to give to needy people outside the church, ‘as we have opportunity’ (Gal 6:10).

In chapters 8 and 9 of 2Corinthians, we find what Tasker calls, ‘a philosophy of Christian giving, which has lessons to teach the church in every age’. You have probably heard the saying, ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (9:7). Colin Buchanan has made the words of 8:9 a children’s song. As with most of Paul’s teaching, this ‘theology of giving’ comes within the context of communication with the churches.

So what was the particular context in which Paul wrote these words about giving? This is his second surviving letter to the church in Corinth. It was some six years after he established this church, and one year after he wrote his first letter. Paul ends that first letter with reference to ‘the collection for the saints’ and with ‘bearing your gifts to Jerusalem’ (1Cor 16:1-3). He also refers to the churches of Galatia being involved in this collection.

This collection, it seems, goes back almost ten years to a commitment Paul gave to James, Peter and John, pillars of the church in Jerusalem, a commitment to remember the poor as he and Barnabas took the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 2:9-10). He later specifies, ‘the poor among the saints in Jerusalem’ (Rom 15:26). The Christians in Jerusalem were probably suffering from a famine; in the days of Claudius, AD46, there was a huge famine (Acts 11:28). Christians in Jerusalem were persecuted by the majority Jewish population; the famine would have added to their suffering. Gentiles were less targeted by the Jews, so Gentile churches did not suffer as greatly as those in Jerusalem. Yet Gentile churches were not always rich, although the church in Corinth seems to have been more wealthy than most.

Paul was in Macedonia writing this letter. Titus had returned from Corinth with good news about a change of heart among the majority in this church; they were sorry, and wanted to resume fellowship with the apostle. Paul was overjoyed, and writes positively of having confidence in them in everything (7:16). This ‘everything’ apparently included the collection which he set in place, and which Titus reminded them of during his visit; probably after seeing them repent of their accusations against Paul. One accusation was that Paul was pocketing the money from this collection (2:17).

Despite this accusation, Paul pressed on with this collection, urging the Corinthians to press on also. He challenges them to do so by informing them of the ‘grace of God given to the Macedonian churches’, the ‘grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ’, our first two subheadings today. This leads to the ‘grace of God not yet complete with the Corinthians’ and finally, to the exhortation, ‘give according to what you have’.

**1. Grace of God given to the Macedonian churches**

The churches of Macedonia included, Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. In writing to the Philippians, Paul remembers the help they sent him in the beginning, even as he ministered beyond Macedonia (Phil 4:15). Their gracious and generous giving included the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. The Christians in Macedonia were persecuted by both Romans and Jews. Persecution often begins with discrimination in terms of public benefits, education, and jobs. Moreover, the church often consists of poorer people from a society. Despite their poverty, or maybe because of their poverty, the Christians in Macedonia gave willingly, with joy, and with liberality to this collection (8:2).

‘Christian joy arises from a sense of sins forgiven and from the assurance that the sinner now enjoys the favour of God; and Christian liberality springs from a heart conscious of the infinite generosity of God in giving his Son to redeem mankind’.

Paul refers to three aspects of the Macedonian’s giving. Firstly, they gave even beyond their ability, and did so willingly. Their giving was selfless and sacrificial. In a church in India we saw a plaque listing the names of people who gave money for a new building, and the amount they gave. We gently told them that this was not biblical because Jesus says, ‘Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing’ (Mat 6:3). We do not seek the praise of men, but await the reward of God. Paul was noting the giving of the Macedonians as a challenge or stimulus for the Corinthians.

Secondly, the Macedonians saw giving as a privilege because it strengthened their fellowship with other churches, especially the Judean churches. Christian giving is done with prayer, and loving concern for those being helped. It is not a matter of flinging a few coins towards a faceless beggar.

Thirdly, ‘they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God’ (8:5). This is what the ‘grace of giving’ means. This is the unique aspect of Christian giving. We first give ourselves to the Lord, which means looking to Jesus and remembering the abundance of grace which he showed towards us when he gave, not money, but his very life for us; he gave his life that we might live. We have nothing without Christ, but in Christ we have everything. As God’s people we must appreciate his amazing grace, and we must reflect this grace to the world. Sacrificial giving is an essential part of any fellowship focussed on Jesus Christ.

**2. Grace of God in Jesus Christ**

We jump ahead to the second and most solemn challenge the apostle put before the Corinthians with regard to giving. He was not commanding them to give towards the collection because gifts, like love, cannot be commanded. A gift that is commanded is a charge or tax. Paul was testing the sincerity of their love by informing them of the diligence of others, and now by reminding them of ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (8:9). We are talking about giving as a grace given by the Lord. The list of spiritual gifts in Romans 12 includes, ‘he who gives, with liberality’ (Rom 12:8). The various gifts of the Spirit include that of giving. It is the Spirit who moves us to exercise these gifts, and moves us to give ‘as unto the Lord’.

Jesus ‘was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor’ (8:9). What does the apostle mean? Jesus was born in a stable, not a palace. He lived without a place to lay his head, and left no material things when he died, except for the clothes he was wearing. But Paul is not simply calling us to emulate Jesus in a life of poverty. He is speaking about the grace of Jesus, who left the riches of glory in heaven to come into this sinful world (Phil 2:6f). He humbled himself and gave his very life for us. Jesus took on poverty for our sakes, that we might no longer be poor but rich in Him. He gives us eternal life, something money cannot buy. This is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ; we are saved by grace through faith.

The Macedonians understood this truth as they ‘gave themselves first to the Lord’. Paul urges the Corinthians to do the same, and he urges us to do this also. Clinging to the things of this world prevents us from clinging to Christ. It is said, if your hands are full of worldly things they cannot receive the blessings of Christ. If our hearts are not full of the love of Christ, our hands will be grasping rather than giving. Do you believe that God in his grace is able to give you abundantly more than you ever give to him, or give to the poor in his name?

**3. Grace of God not yet complete with the Corinthians**

Paul started the collection for the churches in Judea when he started the church in Corinth. When they sent a letter to him in Ephesus he answered a question about this collection (1Cor 16:1). Paul did not accept support for himself from this church, a policy which backfired to some extent (11:7). Christians should be taught the grace of giving from the beginning. Some churches in India and Africa struggle because the members do not give to the work. They became too dependent on support from rich foreigners. It is encouraging to see young churches which understand the grace of giving.

Churches should be self-supporting, and more than that, should be ready to help sister churches in times of need, and give to missionaries (Eph 4:28). I know someone who took a job specifically so she could support a missionary. Support of the local church is through tithing, a principle established in the OT. The collection being made by Paul does not mention tithing because it is an offering additional to the tithe.

After Paul left the church in Corinth it was troubled by divisions, by poor leadership, and lack of discipline. A church focused on itself loses focus on the greater work of the Lord. It is no wonder the church at Corinth forgot about the needs of the ‘mother’ church in Judea, despite reminders from Titus when he visited. Now that they had repented of their attacks upon Paul, he at least was hopeful they would re-focus on the collection.

Paul acknowledges the various graces the Lord had given to this church (8:7). They were aware of these, even if they became obsessed with the spectacular gifts. Paul refers to the gifts of faith, speech, knowledge and diligence, which interestingly are included in 1Corinthians 13. Paul concluded that such gifts must be exercised in love, which is his message here in verse 7. ‘See that you abound in this grace also’ he writes, referring to the grace of giving. Love for Christ, and love for your neighbour, are the two greatest commands, commands which lead to the grace of giving.

The command is love, and the grace is giving out of love. Paul is not commanding them to give to this collection but testing the sincerity of their love. Paul is giving advice as their ‘father in the faith’. They were eager to give before trouble erupted in their church- they wrote to him about this collection (9:2,1Cor 16:1). He urges them to remember those earlier days of love and unity within the fellowship. In those days they gave generously, so let them complete what they began. It is always best, and ‘to your advantage’, to complete whatever task the Lord gives you (8:10).

**4. Give according to what you have**

Jesus made it very clear that God does not look at the size of the gift, but at the size of the giver’s heart, when he spoke of the widows copper coins (Luke 21:1-4). Of first importance is a willing heart, a heart of faith, a heart moved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are to give according to what we have, not what we do not have (8:12). We give according to what God has given us by way of income (1Cor 16:2). We must never say that my small gift is of no benefit- unless your small gift is from an abundance given you by the Lord. God loves a cheerful giver, not a grudging giver (9:7).

Within the church, and across churches, people fall upon hard times. We must pray for brethren in their difficulty, but also help as we are able: ‘Faith without works is dead’ (James 2:14f). Paul was not asking for the church in Judea to be made rich at their expense; he was asking for a sense of equality within the broader fellowship of believers. He found this principle in God’s giving of manna in the desert (8:15). Gather what they may, each ended up with sufficient for their needs. The manna did not keep until the next day anyway.

Unfortunately, gold and silver do not perish like manna- but remember our bodies do! Many of us are like the rich fool, wanting to accumulate much more than we need (Luke 12). But thieves may break in, or there may be a stock-market crash. Paul also wants us to remember that the day may come when the tables are turned, when those we helped will be called upon to help us because we have fallen on hard times. For all these reasons, let us understand the grace of giving. Let us, as we have opportunity, be willing and cheerful givers.