

## A CHURCH WORTH TALKING ABOUT *2 Corinthians 8:1-5*

Many high-profile churches garner much attention. In a real sense, that's a good thing. Model churches should be spotlighted to challenge and encourage others. But it is not good to spotlight a church that is not spiritually healthy. Unfortunately, there are some prominent preachers, churches, and ministries that should be ignored at-best and censured at-worst. Instead, they are endorsed, celebrated, and given freedom to defy God's word in the name of Jesus Christ. We live in a reality-TV culture, where people are famous for being famous. The same is true of many churches. *What kind of church deserves our attention?* 2 Corinthians 8:1 answers, *"We want you know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia."* Then Paul testifies about the generous giving of those churches. Here's the point: A GENEROUS CHURCH IS A CHURCH WORTH TALKING ABOUT. Of course, generosity is not the only thing that makes a church worth talking about. But a church cannot be healthy if its members are not generous givers. In fact, a church can be strong in every other area, but it is still not a healthy model for others if its members are not generous. Verse 7 says, *"But as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you – see that you excel in this act of grace also."* A generous church is a church worth talking about.

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Persecution, famine, overpopulation, taxation, and their own generosity put the saints in Jerusalem in desperate straits. Although Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, the Jews were his beloved countrymen. Consequently, between A.D. 52 and 57, much of Paul's energy was devoted to raising money for the needy saints in Jerusalem. According to 2 Corinthians 8:10-11, when the appeal was made to the Corinthians, they had a ready desire to give. However, before Paul could get to Corinth to receive their offering, he received word that he might not be welcomed there. Would-be leaders within the church had launched an attack against him. Character assassination was their weapon of choice. The contents, tone, and circumstances surrounding 1 Corinthians gave them ammunition to use against him. 2 Corinthians is Paul's defense, in which he seeks to refute his accusers and restores his credibility with the Corinthians.

Paul was sure the Corinthians knew the truth about him. In 2 Corinthians 7:16 he says, *"I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you."* Paul felt that whatever he had written in the first seven chapters of this letter was sufficient to restore his welcome in Corinth. Having restored his credibility, he moves into chapter 8 by saying, *"We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia."* Feel Paul's heartbeat here; He had to write 2 Corinthians to defend himself. But as soon as he felt it was safe, he turned his attention back to the collection for the saints. It's as if Paul said, "I am confident that you know me. But there is something more important you need to know. You need to know about what God is graciously doing through the Macedonians

churches.” Paul deemed the churches of Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica to be worthy of attention, because of their generosity.

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In this passage, Paul writes to the church at Corinth about the churches of Macedonia for the sake of the church in Jerusalem. In other words, this text is about church-based giving. Charities, social programs, and parachurch ministries are not in view. The assumption of the text is that Christian generosity is to be practiced in the church, by the church, and for the church. Of course, there is nothing wrong with giving to noble causes outside of the church. But Galatians 6:10 says: *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”* It is the Lord’s will that the local church be the primary context in which Christians use their material possessions to further the work of God’s kingdom. So when Paul calls the Corinthians to generous giving, he gives them the practical example of the Macedonian churches. This example gives three reasons why a generous church is a church worth talking about.

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## **I. THE GRACE OF A GENEROUS CHURCH**

In this text, Paul lifts up the generous giving of the Macedonian churches as an example. But he never directly mentions money. In fact, he seems to purposely avoid it. Instead, the tone of the text is overtly spiritual. We see this in the fact that, although he lifts the Macedonian Christians as an example of generosity, he does not give them the credit for it. Verse 1 says that their generosity was really *“the grace of God.”* Their generosity was the work of God’s grace.

**In 1999, Slobodan Milosevic launched a campaign of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. Tens-of-thousands of people fled the region, especially after President Bill Clinton order air-attacks. But the surrounding nations would not allow the refugees to cross their borders, except for one, Macedonia. Macedonia, a poor and small nation, opened its doors even when America, the richest nation in the world, was hesitant. They didn’t have a choice. They could not secure their borders well enough to stop the refugees. Moreover, they did it because it was politically expedient. And when they began to complain that it was too much of a strain on their resources, outside agencies (including America) encouraged them to continue, with a promise to help.**

Rewind the tape to the first century. When the saints in Jerusalem needed help, the small churches of Macedonia stepped up. They did it willingly. They did not have any political agenda to further, and they had no promise that their expenses would be covered or offset by any outside group. So when Paul lifted up their example of generosity, no leader, government, or relief agency got the credit. Verse 1 says, *“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.”* A generous church is a church worth talking about, because when that church acts in Christian love, God alone gets the glory. It is not just human generosity. It is God’s grace. 1 Peter 5:10 refers to God as *“the God of*

*all grace.*” Here we have clear evidence that grace is not just a ticket to heaven. God’s grace has transforming power to make us generous people. According to verses 1-2, God’s grace moves us to generosity in two ways.

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#### **A. GOD’S GRACE MOVES OUR HEARTS TO GIVE.**

Human beings are not naturally generous. It is more natural for us to grab than to give. We are naturally acquisitive, not donative. When a newborn baby gets hungry, she cries like someone is torturing her. But she does not cry when her mother gets hungry. That is because from the time we are born, we instinctively think about ourselves before others. In fact, mankind is the only one of God’s creations that has a problem with giving. Think about it.

- **The sun gives light and heat.**
- **The moon gives radiance.**
- **The stars give splendor.**
- **The clouds give rain.**
- **The rain gives cleansing and refreshing.**
- **The air gives breath.**
- **The mountains give security.**
- **The flowers give fragrance.**
- **The grass gives beauty.**
- **The trees give fruit.**
- **The animals give meat.**
- **The earth gives minerals.**
- **The ground gives crops.**
- **The crops give food.**
- **And the water gives quenching.**

Man gives nothing. Unfortunately, this tendency follows us even when we become disciples of Jesus Christ. We love to hear about God’s blessings. But we do not want to hear about what God says we should do with those blessings. It’s a sad indictment that many of us wake up in decorated homes, go to the closet and put on a designer outfit, get in our late model cars and drive to church, and when we get there, we put \$5 in the offering. I believe God is still asking the question of Malachi 3:8: *“Will man rob God? Yet, you have robbed me in tithes and in offerings.”* We say, “I just can’t see myself giving all that money in church.” And we do not consider the fact that our words, deeds, and attitudes toward giving make a statement about our love for God, our faith in God, and our devotion to God. Mark it down: If you are not saved, God’s grace is working around you. If you are saved, God’s grace is working for you. But if you are saved and obedient, God’s grace is working in you to move your heart to generosity.

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#### **B. GOD’S GRACE MOVES OUR HANDS TO GIVE.**

Verse 1 declares the fact of God's grace at work in the Macedonians. But verse 2 shows us the results of God's gracious work: *"for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part."* Notice the two paradoxes in this verse. First, the verse tells us the Macedonians were in *"a severe trial of affliction."* Notice how Paul piles on the words here. He says they were in a trial. It was a severe trial. It was a great trial of affliction. The word *"affliction"* pictures the applying of pressure to get all the juice out of a grape or to ground wheat into flour. These people were going through a severe trial of extreme pressure. But they were not miserable, bitter, or complaining. In their extreme pressure, they were filled with joy.

The verse also says they were in *"extreme poverty."* Notice again the piling on of words. The word *poverty* does not mean they were on welfare, or their bills were behind, or they were living from paycheck to paycheck. It means they had absolutely nothing. It is the picture of a man who must beg or die. It's cringing poverty. But it was not just poverty; it was *extreme poverty*. They were at rock bottom. Yet their poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

The example of the Macedonian churches rebukes those of us who use the bad economy as an excuse for not being generous. In this verse, Paul takes great care to show that the saints in Macedonia did not give from a position of prosperity. A severe test of affliction had come upon these local congregations and they had been reduced to deep poverty. But their adversity did not impede their generosity. And their tribulation did not impede their joy. Here's the point:

- **Christian giving depends on one's spiritual convictions, rather than their material circumstances.**
- **Christian stewardship is an act of faith.**
- **We should not use the fact that we cannot give a lot as an excuse not to give at all.**
- **No matter what you are going through, now is the time to give.**
- **The grace of God moves the hand of generous people to give, even when there seems to be so many legitimate reasons not to.**

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## **II. THE GIVING OF A GENEROUS CHURCH**

Verse 3 says: *"For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord."* Paul enters the courtroom. Knowing the Corinthians would cross-examine what he has said about the grace of God given to churches of Macedonia, Paul takes the stand and testifies to the generosity of the Macedonians under the threat of spiritual perjury. Verse 3-4 teaches that a generous church is worth talking about because of the characteristics of its giving.

### **A. A GENEROUS CHURCH GIVES PROPORTIONALLY.**

Tithing was a part of the Old Testament Law, which required that the tenth part of anything gained be given to God off the top. Christians disagree over the place of tithing in the church today. But I believe tithing should be the normative

practice of Christians today. In fact, it should be just a starting place for our giving. And I believe that tithing is a good starting place for Christian giving, because it fulfills the New Testament's call for proportional giving.

1 Corinthians 16:2 says, *"On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come."* This is the New Testament pattern of giving. They were to give as the Lord had prospered them. Their giving was to be representative of God's blessings on their lives. We see that in our text. The Macedonians did not give out of their ability. Verse 3 says they gave *"according to their means."* What's the difference? A millionaire gives a beggar \$20 out of his ability. But a millionaire gives \$250 to charity according to his ability. That is how the Macedonians gave. They gave proportionally. This is also how God gives. Philippians 4:19 says, *"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."*

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#### **B. A GENEROUS CHURCH GIVES SACRIFICIALLY.**

As I studied this text, I could not help but notice how the commentators kept apologizing for the line that says, the churches gave *"beyond their ability."* "Of course God doesn't expect that kind of sacrificial giving today," they said. "This is an exception." But I believe the Holy Spirit led Paul to use these churches as a model of generosity for the very reason that he expects it to be normative of Christians. Our culture would have us to believe that our survival, families, success, health, and happiness are the most important things in life. But that is not the way of Christ. In Luke 14:26-27 Jesus said, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."* DIETRICH BONHOEFFER summarized the call of Christ by saying, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die."

True generosity is not only measured by how much one gives. It also measured by what one keeps! A poor man cannot give as much as a rich man. But the poor man can be more generous than a rich man. We see that in the story of the widow's mite, recorded in Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4. Jesus sat in the temple treasury watching rich people toss coins into the offering receptacles. But a poor widow, who put in just two mites, arrested his attention. Mites were small copper coins worth less than a penny. But when Jesus saw her gift, he said to his disciples, "You have got to see this! This widow has given more than everyone else. They have given a lot. But she has made a greater sacrifice. She has given everything she has." That is what we see in the churches of Macedonia. They not only gave according to their ability. They gave beyond it.

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#### **C. A GENEROUS CHURCH GIVES WILLINGLY.**

2 Corinthians 9:7 says: *“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly to under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver.”* Sad or mad givers do not honor God. God is honored when we give willingly, without being coaxed, ordered, or pressured. Every offering we take up in church is a free-will offering. Church leaders cannot make you give. We only extend an opportunity for you to show your love for Christ, his people, and his work. 2 Corinthians 8:8 puts it this way: *“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine.”* That is the job of the church leaders. We pass out the test. God judges it. So do not get upset when you are exhorted to give. If you have it and are willing to give it, fine. If you are not willing, that’s your business. God does not want your gift if you do not give it willingly. If you don’t have it but are willing, don’t be discouraged. 2 Corinthians 8:12 says, *“For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.”*

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#### **D. A GENEROUS CHURCH GIVES EAGERLY.**

There are many Christians who give proportionally, sacrificially, and willingly. But I have never seen a church that had a spirit of generosity described in verse 4. Paul testifies that the Macedonians were so eager to give that they were *“begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.”* Paul did not pressure them to give. They pressured Paul to take the gift. Paul was apparently reluctant to take their gift. He knew their great affliction and deep poverty. He probably felt they could not afford to give. But they would not take “no” for an answer. May God bless this to be a church like that. May this congregation be made up of members that are so eager to give that it makes the leadership hesitant to even accept their gifts. May this be a church that truly believes the words of the Lord Jesus Paul quotes in Acts 20:35: *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*

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In verse 4, Paul says the churches of Macedonia were *“begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.”* *“Taking part”* translates the Greek word for “fellowship.” The Macedonians viewed their giving as an act of fellowship. This teaches us that our personal giving is a corporate issue. I know this principle runs counter to the strong emphasis we place on confidentiality. But an insistence on total confidentiality contradicts the body dynamic of the Church. Christian giving is personal; but it’s not private, because it is a means by which we fellowship with one another. Generous givers should be recognized to encourage them and to challenge non-givers.

- **That is why God left the story of the widow’s mites on record for us.**
- **That is why God left the story of Ananias and Sapphira on record.**
- **That is why God left the example of Macedonians on record.**

Giving is fellowship. Your giving affects me. My giving affects you. We are members of one another. And a lack of generosity affects the whole body. You

should give because you do not want to miss your blessing. And you should give because you do not want your brothers and sisters in Christ to miss their blessing.

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### **III. THE GODLINESS OF A GENEROUS CHURCH.**

In verse 5, Paul gives his closing statement about the generosity of the Macedonian churches: *“and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”* This is the open secret to Christian generosity. Paul says the Macedonians gave way past his expectations. And they did so because they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to him by the will of God. Have you given yourself like that? Have you given yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ in salvation? Have you given yourself to your church in participating membership? Have you given yourself to the will of God in obedience? Have you thought about the fact that only what you do for Christ will last? Here’s the point:

- **Generous giving follows personal dedication.**
- **When God has you he will have yours.**
- **When we surrender ourselves to the Lord, our giving falls in line.**

**A young woman was killed in a car accident the night before her wedding. The officer on the scene identified her by getting her license out of her wallet. Then he called the family. Her husband-to-be came to identify her body. But as he was leaving, one of the officers asked to have a word with him. “Sir,” the officer said, “when I went into your fiancée’s wallet to get her ID, I couldn’t help but notice the copies of her checks. There was one to the Gamble Street Baptist Church, then one for her light bill, then another to the Gamble Street Baptist Church, then one for groceries, then another to the Gamble Street Baptist Church. Don’t you think that’s strange?” “No, not at all,” was the reply. “You see, as a young girl, my wife had given her life to Jesus Christ as the Gamble Street Baptist Church. And throughout her life she had been a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ at the Gamble Street Baptist Church.” On that aborted eve of his wedding, the young man led that officer to Christ. Through his fiancée was dead, her witness lived on because of her commitment to Jesus and her local church.**