

Grace, Joy, Stewardship: Generosity Encouraged (2 Corinthians 8)

Good morning, everyone.

Prayer

Let's pray:

Lord, we come before you with soft hearts, before a Father who loves us. Help us to hear your word and to understand the grace that you give us to participate in your work throughout the world. Help us to see the privilege of the mission that you have called us to. I ask that you would help me to preach faithfully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Opening

My goal this morning is to bring us to a place where we understand God's grace toward us, in the area of stewardship, and that we grasp this grace in such a way that we are filled with joy.

We are going to spend a good amount of time on grace and its implications, but then we will also look at joy and what stewardship looks like on a practical basis.

A major theme in this book is that the Corinthians needed to love each other and use the gifts that God has given them to serve the church, rather than using their Christian freedom or their abilities as a source of pride.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul teaches the church to encourage each other, to be reconciled to one another when there has been repentance, and he assures them that our lives here on earth are only like jars of clay compared with the treasure of the heavenly dwelling that God has prepared for us.

He also has some important lessons for how we are to show love to the Church in an international context. In chapter 8, Paul tells a story about another church, up north in Macedonia, that experienced God's blessings in a really exciting way.

He says, verse 1: *We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*

This year, we learned that "grace," means something given to us that we do not deserve. Such as, God gives us the grace of a new life that will never end.

"Mercy" is not getting something that we do deserve. God's mercy means that we don't get the punishment that we deserve for the things that we have done wrong.

God has given the Macedonian churches grace. How do we see this? Paul continues:

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in, here it is: rich generosity.

God gave the Macedonian churches, which were poor, the grace of... being generous.

For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

The grace that Paul was speaking about, this gift from God, was the privilege of giving money to another church that needed help.

The Macedonian churches were poor. The Corinthian church, on the other hand was in a wealthy city.

Perhaps it was a bit like telling a church in Hong Kong about how generous a sister church in a developing country had been. Poor as the Macedonians were, God gave them the grace to give to another church, and this was a blessing.

Grace from God

This brings us to our first point: The opportunity to give is grace from God. What does this mean? Does it mean we don't deserve to give to others?

How do we come to grips with becoming poorer as an act of grace?

This is a tough concept in a place like Hong Kong, where wealth is seen as the ultimate expression of a blessed life. Actually, this is not so different from what the Jewish people believed.

The rich young ruler in Luke chapter 18, the one that seemed to have a perfect life, He was rich. The Jewish people considered this wealth to be blessings from God for following the law, but Jesus demonstrated that wealth was actually an idol for him. This was shocking to people because wealth was considered a sign of God's favor, a blessing, something to be admired, as it is here in Hong Kong.

We can understand giving as grace if we think from a new perspective, which is radical for us in Hong Kong, and radical for the Jews. The perspective is this:

God owns everything.

God owns everything. What we have is only because God allows us to have it.

Look at verse 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.*

Jesus, Paul says, was rich. Does he mean like Lee Ka Shing or Nick Young from Crazy Rich Asians? No. God's wealth is beyond that. Psalm 24:1 says, *The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.* That's because he made it. Romans 11:35-36 says, *'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?' For from him and through him and for him are all things.*

In Colossians 1:15, Paul says that Jesus *is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

Jesus was instrumental in creation, and the whole reason why they were created is for him to own. This is like a craftsman tailor-making a wedding ring to give to his bride. It's the bride's ring because it's given to her, but it is also her ring in a very special way, because the craftsman molded it so that it could be hers.

This is the way that everything was made for Jesus; the very purpose of that ring was to belong to the bride; the very purpose of everything is to belong to Jesus.

We belong to God

The second step to understanding giving as grace is that we belong to God. Everything we own belongs to Christ, and we belong to Christ as well.

In Colossians 1, the passage continues: *He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

We as the church belong to Jesus, like the body belongs to the head. That is because our lives were redeemed by Christ and we are his possession. (1 Peter 2:9; Titus 2:14)

The implications of this are important, and it means that giving is a part of a much larger perspective. In the passage, the Macedonian church lived out this reality.

They exceeded Paul's expectations in 2 Corinthians 8:5 by giving to their fellow Christians, because they gave themselves first to the Lord. They recognized that they belonged to Jesus.

Their generosity was not a simple offering responding to a need. It flowed from knowing their identity.

Giving and stewardship is far more than something we do, it flows from who we are—who we belong to.

How we treat God's possessions reflects Christ's example

What we have belongs to Jesus, and we belong to Jesus too. This brings us to the next point: How we treat our possessions (which really belong to God) reflects Christ's example.

Let's look again at 2 Corinthians 8:8-9, *I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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.*

Jesus put aside all he deserved to become a human baby, completely helpless, and died for sinners who had rejected him. He was rich and became poor, so that we can be reconciled to God, leave the poverty of our sin and enjoy eternal life with God.

Christ's action in becoming poor is an example for us. Paul says that he is not commanding the Corinthian church to give, rather he says that giving would reflect their love for the worldwide church, just as Christ gave up everything for his church.

It was a radical thing for a Teacher, as the disciples called Jesus, to wash his disciples' feet. It was even more radical for the Creator to come to earth as a baby to die for our sins.

Because Jesus did not hold onto what he deserves, we should not hold tightly to things or to our dignity, or to our cultural way of doing things.

We don't need to have those signs of blessing or favor, signs of status to prove we made it in life or finally got that good job, because Christ's death for us was so much more of a sign of God's favor toward us.

Our status as children of God is far more secure than whether we have an unparalleled sea view from our flats.

If Jesus became poor for us, it should not be too crazy for us to hold loosely to things that we have; and to align our lives now to what is important to Christ.

Being able to give of what we have, our money and our time, to follow the example of the one who gave the glory of heaven to save us, should be a privilege.

Our things belong to Jesus, we belong to Jesus, and he has called us to follow him.

Implications: Living as a steward

This is what Stewardship means, instead of holding tightly to what we have, we should seek to use God's things that he has given us for his purposes.

How does that make you feel. Does this resonate with you? Maybe you think, all those hours at work allow me to have the lifestyle I have now. I saved up for my things. I earned them—me. Or maybe you agree. It's helpful to think about what the purpose of all this is.

In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher reported back on an experiment he did with life.

He tried to find life's purpose, by pursuing knowledge, by working hard, through pleasure, and he found everything to be emptiness and impossible to grasp, like mist.

We feel this is depressing, because we feel that this is not how it is supposed to be. With Christ, however, life is not meaningless. Life has purpose.

Without Christ, Ecclesiastes 2:18 says: *I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether that person will be wise or foolish? Yet they will have control over all the fruit of my toil into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun.*

In other words, there are limitations to working hard for things and living wisely? Everyone dies.

What if you amass a fortune like Jack Ma or Bill Gates. There is a Chinese saying, and this is not one of those made-up Chinese sayings.

“In three generations, the wealth will be gone.” And actually, once we die, we don't get to keep it.

Jesus, however, gives us an entirely new perspective. Being possessed by God gives purpose to the things we own and to our lives.

If we know that what we have is not ours, but entrusted to us to manage, there is purpose to those things beyond just enjoying them before their “use by” date or to get our children started on an easier life. Whatever we have, much or little, has a purpose.

If we belong to Christ, our lives are not *like a mist*. Our lives have purpose, being redeemed for eternity, not fading away quickly like the temporary life on earth.

We live not just as God's money managers, but as God's managers of every aspect of our lives, which belong to him.

The starting point to doing what God desires is not a thought like, “oh it's in the 10 commandments, so that what we need to do.” Or: “Oh, first Sunday of the month, it's time for tithe.”

It comes from an understanding that we are a possession of Jesus, and we acknowledge that this is what we are, and we think about what that means for our decisions. Yes, this is a big responsibility, but it means that our lives matter, and what we do with God's things matters.

Giving is something we do, but stewardship is connected to who we belong to. Stewardship is managing God's possessions, including our lives, in a way that honors him.

Giving can be part of that, but stewardship is broader. Stewardship means we have been entrusted by God to manage everything for him.

This idea goes all the way back to Creation. God gave Adam the task to rule the Earth. Adam was an under-ruler of creation, managing it on behalf of God. This is how we should think of our own things now.

Just to recap, if God has graciously given us his things to manage, and he has given us the capacity to manage our lives and those things that he owns, it makes sense that this choice to use God's things for what pleases God is a gift from God to us, whom God loves and has given those things to.

[This answers our question of how giving can be considered grace]

The Joy of Stewardship

The opportunity to be stewards is an act of grace. But Paul mentioned something else too—Joy. Back to verse 1, Paul says:

We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

Joy. The opportunity to use God's things in the way that pleases God resulted in Joy, which led to rich generosity.

Having the responsibility to manage God's things may seem like a big task. It could make us feel a lot of pressure. If we really were a portfolio manager employed to invest these assets, that could be the case, but our relationship with God is different.

It comes back to grace. The reason why we have God's things in the first place is because of God's grace. He loves us. Extending the idea more personally—God owns us too. The reason why you just took that last breath is because God loves you. We are to manage God's things for him, but the relationship is not like being an I-banker for a client; it is much more intimate.

Do you know where the phrase “sixpence none the richer comes from? Well, CS Lewis tells a story about a father who gives his son 6 pence. For that little boy, that was a lot of money! But then the son went and bought a birthday present for his father, and came back beaming with a big smile on his face.

The father was really happy with the gift, and the boy was so pleased to give the present to his father. Both were filled with joy!

What happened? The boy didn't end up with anything extra, and the father was 6 pence none the richer, but the son made a choice to use what the father gave him to show his love.

When we make that decision as stewards to use what God has given us to love our Heavenly Father, the result is joy! The boy couldn't buy that gift without the 6 pence—that opportunity to give was grace—and using that gift to show love to the father resulted in pure joy for both parties.

This perspective can help us to see why the Macedonian churches, while they were poor, had hearts overflowing with joy because of the opportunity to give to God's people—to be instruments of God's blessing for his worldwide church.

Stewardship in the Church

What does this mean for how we live, and what does this look like practically in 21st century Hong Kong? Once we realize that it is a gift of grace to spend the resources we have for what God loves, what does that look like day to day?

Stewardship can look very different, depending on our circumstances. Stewardship is about using what we have been given wisely, for God's priorities of spreading the Gospel to the nations and Christians loving each other as Christ loved the church.

A key principle is that God doesn't need the money. This means we should not get discouraged when we do not have a lot to give or feel that we are saving the world when we can give a lot.

I remember when I got my first job after school, I was actually really excited to start giving to missionaries. My parents were missionaries and had received support from churches and individuals for all of my life, and now I could start playing the role of a supporter in the lives of others.

I could give more than I could before when I had short-term or summer jobs in between school breaks. I thought, “wow, now I can really make an impact!”

One afternoon, I was listening to a song by Keith Green, where he narrates things that God might say to encourage Christians not be to

lukewarm. One of the lines was, “I don’t need your money, I want your life.”

I realized that God doesn’t need my money. He could provide for the missionaries perfectly well without my support.

What God really wanted is for me to give myself first to Him, which is what the Macedonians did, and to obediently and joyfully give, not because God needs the money, but like the son in CS Lewis’ story, giving to missionaries reflects love for God’s priority of seeing the Gospel go to the nations, and it is a privilege to share in that passion that God has.

We must give ourselves to the Lord, to his priorities, not thinking that we are saving the day, or getting discouraged because our simple gifts cannot make an impact, but aligning our hearts with God’s heart. No matter how much we give, it is all 6 pence to our Lord who owns everything.

God doesn’t need the money, he wants our hearts. So if you are a student or feel you are not making much money now, if you have chosen to spend your time, as stewards of that time, in other ways to glorify the Lord, be encouraged.

What if you feel do not have a lot of skills to bring to the table in terms of using your life for the sake of the gospel? Jesus chose fishermen and tax collectors, not the best public relations reps, to bring his message of salvation to the nations.

He chose the weak things of the world, and the foolish things and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast and people would know that the power of the Gospel is from God, not from men.

What if you want to live as a good steward for Christ, but have found that at the end of the day, while you may have enough, you have not really given much of that the body of Christ, or you have

spent time mainly on yourself or friends, rather than serving in church?

Sometimes we have the desire to do something, but it doesn’t happen because we haven’t made the effort to plan, or we are not sure how to plan for spending and giving.

We need to be intentional about how we use our resources if we want to use them in the way that reflects the importance of the gospel.

As we draw toward the end of 2018, this could be a good time to think about the ways that the Lord has blessed us and to do some thinking about the year ahead.

This doesn’t need to be complicated. It can be as simple as putting together a plan of how we divide our income among giving, saving and spending, then make sure we generally follow that plan.

You can also ask for help from a friend to put together a plan with you and to keep each other accountable. As believers, we are meant to rely on each other and to help each other live the way that Christ wants us to.

Perhaps if we need the discipline, we could set up a standing order to give, or set a monthly reminder on our phones to give a consistent amount.

What if we have a plan and have decided to give and we are thinking about who we give to? Should we give to just the church?

If we give to missionaries, how should we decide which missionaries to give to? Are Christian charities ok? Secular charities?

Well, since giving is not just something we do, but about who we belong to, we should give in a way that reflects the owner’s priorities.

Before he ascended to heaven, Jesus gave the disciples, and by extension, us, the task of telling the world about him.

Our mission is to tell others the gospel. Jesus also told us to love the church. Jesus loves the church and gave himself for the church. When we give and when we spend our time, we should reflect the priorities of the one who owns everything.

This does not mean that we should not give to secular charities, or organizations that are doing good things, because they can be good things and show to non-Christians that believers are compassionate people. However, we may want to consider the distinction among gospel-centered work, compassionate giving to Christians and other giving.

Some of us have the tendency to spend whatever we have, for others, the temptation may be to save whatever we can. For both of these types of people, giving can be difficult, because we are giving up other things we could have either now or in the future.

Recognizing our things as belong to God and under our management, however, can help us use them in a way that reflects the owner's priorities.

As we think about this past year, let's give thanks for what God has entrusted to our care. As a church, think of this responsibility from our Father as a gift and a joy, not as a burden, but a reflection of who we are as Jesus' possessions.

Let's use our lives and our resources in the coming year to reflect our love for the one who gave himself for us.

Let's support the cause of the gospel and show love to each other with our resources and our time. This is a privilege, and this gives purpose to our lives, our work and our wealth.