


## 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-5

### THE SECRET OF GREAT GIVING

“We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”<sup>1</sup>

iving is neither the most anticipated nor the most welcomed sermon topic in this day. However, one should not conclude that the subject is ignored by the modern pulpit. Stewardship sermons are frequently relegated to the realm of caricature. I can count on one hand messages I have heard providing instruction for giving. I have heard messages pleading for generosity and messages reminding hearers of obligations to underwrite missionary enterprise or pleading for support to erect a new building, but I have heard few messages instructing Christians in the manner of giving or defining giving that qualifies as great.

Any of us would appreciate a reputation for generosity; and I am quick to say that as a congregation we do enjoy a reputation for generosity. By the same token, I doubt that many of us can name more than a handful of congregations which are generally viewed as great in giving. I wonder if we know the secret of great giving. If we know the secret of great giving we will be able to advance the cause of Christ even as we move toward being an encouragement to others. To this end, join me in study of one verse found in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians.

**THE MACEDONIANS WERE SPOKEN OF AS GREAT IN GIVING** — Though the text does not specifically identify the Macedonian Christians as great, it does clearly establish that Paul considered them to be great in giving. Moreover, it is apparent that their greatness was unrelated to their personal portfolios. Paul commended these saints for generosity even though they were acknowledged as impoverished. The earlier verses remind us of the Apostle’s view of these Macedonian saints. “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” [2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-4].

The Apostle spoke of the generosity of the Macedonians as a grace which they had received from God. The word translated “favour” in the fourth verse is the Greek word *cháris*, usually translated “grace.” This grace allowed the Macedonians to ignore severe trial and extreme poverty as they prepared to give. Furthermore, the grace they had received so infected these impoverished saints with overflowing joy that it welled up in rich generosity permitting them to give beyond their ability—they gave as much as they were able, and then they gave some more. The Macedonian believers seem to have viewed the act of giving as a privilege and they saw their giving as a service to the saints of God. Such attitudes are humbling, as is the resultant generosity. Frankly, we tend to be uncomfortable in the presence of such generosity.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Giving which originates out of human determination will always find an excuse to “watch out for number one.” Such giving always calculates the ability to be generous, all the while focusing on the immediate situation and paying careful consideration to future anticipated or planned expenditures. Such giving may be commended by other people since it appears thoughtful and demonstrates such precision. Nevertheless, giving that originates within the human determination is described by care and caution for the “self.” Giving which is obligatory, however, is giving that is grudging; it will be seen as such. Giving which is commanded under law is giving which rises to a particular demand and deems itself worthy of praise.

In contradistinction to these forms of giving, great giving always originates in grace and is subject to grace. Great giving recognises the infinite grace of God and confesses that no individual can out give God. Great giving seeks neither to commend the giver to God nor to obtain merit; rather, the gift is given in recognition of grace already received. Great giving always focuses outward refusing to permit the giver to become self-centred. Great giving is compassionate, rejecting as unworthy every thought of personal comfort which conflicts with the needs of others. All the while, great giving accepts responsibility for the larger world. Great giving is determined by the size of the giver’s heart and not by the size of the gifts given. Great giving is a demonstration of trust in the giver’s relationship to Him who gives freely out of the infinite abundance of His grace. Great giving is less concerned with personal comfort than with demonstration of faith in the unseen God. Above all else, great giving seeks to honour God and to glorify Him. Great giving is that giving which expresses the divine transformation in the life of the one giving. By these criteria, we contemporary Christians have some way to go before we can lay claim to being great givers. Nevertheless, the example of the Macedonians ever stands to challenge us in our giving, pointing us toward the worthy and noble goal of great giving.

**THE MACEDONIANS SURPRISED THE APOSTLE** — One of the delightful aspects of great giving is that it is unexpected. The Macedonians surprised the Apostle—Paul expected one response to his plea, and he witnessed another. A minister is human and to a degree his actions in the pulpit reflect his human condition. Consequently, when he prepares to take up an offering from a congregation the minister will quite naturally consider how best to present the plea. The words of the appeal will be carefully crafted and the worship thoughtfully presented. That minister will take care to insure that the gifts are received at a propitious time, that the appeal is carefully phrased to speak to the deepest senses of duty and to the love for Christ so that the congregation is motivated to give generously. I suppose that Paul was in a similar situation when he brought an appeal for relief of the poor saints in Jerusalem. Moreover, I would think that the Apostle did not expect much from these Macedonian saints in light of their own grinding poverty.

A great evangelist of another era built a school in the American South many years ago. That school, a bastion of fundamental Christianity, has been the source of great blessing to the churches of our Lord since its founding. You might suppose that the school had rich benefactors, that wealthy individuals provided rich gifts for that work. The first president of the school, that southern evangelist, stated that the school was built on the nickels and dimes of common people. It was the pin money, the butter and egg money of farm women, the small gifts of labouring men, which built that institution which has blessed so many.

I praise God that I have known some wealthy men and women who were deeply in love with the Master and who were a source of blessing to the cause of Christ. I thank God that there have been and that there are people of wealth who are generous toward the work of Christ. However, when the books of Heaven are opened and the final accounting is provided it will be discovered that it was common men and women who were the main foundation for the advance of the Kingdom of God. The multiplied small gifts of common people are the building blocks of the work of God in the advance of His Kingdom. That is widely true throughout the Kingdom of God, and it is likewise no doubt true in this place.

The work dependent upon the gifts of one individual or a few is a work which is always in imminent peril of failing. Should those few generous donors become disenchanted, the work is imperilled. The work built upon a diversity of gifts and which involves as many as possible to share in the task is a work that has broad foundations and that enjoys inherent stability. Impoverished people surprise us because we so often think in worldly terms and not as God thinks. It is God's delight to accomplish much with little so that He might have the glory.

**THE MACEDONIANS GAVE THEMSELVES FIRST TO THE LORD** — What can a poor man do when confronted by the challenge to provide for the work of God? What can a poor woman do when challenged to honour God? There are people who have been a rich blessing to others who laboured in obscurity and toiled in the shadows and few knew of their labours. The single mother with limited means cannot give great gifts. Her small income is already attached to care for her family and she hasn't the ability to do any great deeds as the world counts greatness. That man who is unemployed or who holds a job which provides a modest salary is unable to provide great gifts which make the world sit up and take notice. What can such people do?

You may recall an incident Jesus used to teach His disciples a needed lesson about giving? The account is in **MARK 12:41-44**. "[Jesus] sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'"

That poor widow received the commendation of the Lord of Glory, not for the size of her gift but for the greatness of her heart. That poor widow was a living demonstration of the action which seizes the attention of the Living God—she loved God deeply. The Macedonian saints "gave themselves first to the Lord." They made a commitment which would change every aspect of their service; they gave themselves first to the Lord.

What would happen if a church—one congregation of the Lord's people— actually were to practise what the Macedonians modelled? What would it be if we were that church? What would result if for one month, or if even for one week, the membership of this congregation were to determine that we would give ourselves first to the Lord? What changes in our lives and in the interactions with others would we observe if without reservation we gave ourselves to the Lord? What would happen if we lived with such commitment?

“Ah, Lord God, here are the funds which You have entrusted to my oversight. How would You have me distribute those funds? Where would You have me invest these moneys?”

“Ah, Master, here is my life and the strength of my hands. How shall I serve You this day? Where would you have me labour for You today?”

We would soon set aside the thought of the need for advancing self; rather, every opportunity for personal advancement would become instead an opportunity to advance the cause of Christ and He would have the first and final say in all such matters. Gone would be the thought that we needed to care for our personal comfort, and in the place of all such perishing considerations would be a renewed concern to bring everlasting glory to the Eternal God. We would weigh our actions in light of eternity and invest time in considering how to win others to the Faith. What power would be seen within our community! What souls would be saved!

It is my considered opinion that few Christians in this day have given themselves first to the Lord. I cannot speak for generations past, but even in my own life I fear that I see too much of self given precedence over the cause of the Master. I fear for the labours of this day and for the feeble work even of this congregation—a congregation that I am confident is seeking His honour—when I consider the Words of the Master: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you” [LUKE 6:46]?

If we gave ourselves to the Lord, think of what would likely occur. At our workplace we would become salt and light. Darkness would be dispelled and the rotting stench of modern culture would be dissipated as a fresh breeze from heaven swept through our lives. Our colleagues would be confronted with the demands of righteousness and wickedness would be dispelled—shamed into silence—by our mere presence. Souls would be won to Christ daily as we spoke of Him and as we invited outsiders to consider His grace and to accept His yoke. Church buildings would be filled not only on Sunday but at other times as the people of God met for fellowship, for instruction and to build one another. Every member of the congregation would consider himself or herself to be servants of Christ; they would endeavour to serve one another in love. Every thought of self-advancement and self-aggrandisement would be banished from our thinking and we would instead consider how we might build one another in the Faith. The missionary concern of the congregation would be renewed; and young men and women would give themselves to serve Christ at home and abroad in great numbers and those serving in the home church would provide for that renewed service through generous gifts to the glory of God. This would be the result of the people of God giving themselves first to the Lord.

I pause to ask you, is it not time that you and I gave ourselves fully to the Lord? Is it not time that we considered whether we are fully surrendered to Him and to His will? Is it not time that you and I determine that in whatever path He may lead and to whatever task He may assign us we will serve Him first? Then my work will no longer be merely a means to earn money to spend on my pleasure; it will be a means by which I seek to glorify Christ my Lord. My time will no longer be my own; I will seek to honour God by the manner in which my hours are spent. Though I accept the responsibility to provide for my family and though I accept the responsibility to care for my own personal needs, Christ is Lord and He shall be first in my life.

**THE MACEDONIANS GAVE THEMSELVES AS WELL TO THE WORKERS** — In the text I am startled to find that the Macedonians having given themselves first to the Lord, then gave themselves to the Lord's workers, the missionaries serving among them. I am startled because if I listen to the strident voices of contemporary Christians I would consider Christian workers as dispensable and disposable, mere adjuncts to the desires of a given assembly.

This attitude is demonstrated in an adage which is current among many Christians: "Pastors come and pastors go, but the church remains." According to this point of view the church hires Christian workers and thus the church can fire Christian workers. If His Word applies, God appoints His workers and the church can but ratify that which the Master does. Consequently, one can discover the depth of love for the Master in a church by exploring the expressions of commitment to the servants of the Lord demonstrated by that congregation. Does a congregation value the labours of those who give themselves to the service of Christ? Does a congregation honour Christian workers and set them free to work for Him? Such value and honour reflect the love of that church for Christ Himself.

It is difficult for a minister to speak of the manner in which a congregation ought to honour the worker. As pastor, I am open when I say that I recognise that it could appear that the preacher is advocating a better position for himself. However, I would be remiss as a teacher of the Word was I to neglect to instruct you fully in the will of God. The manner for honouring Christian workers is spelled out in several places the Word of God. Those who serve Christ and His churches are to be treated generously as is apparent from even a casual consideration of texts such as those of **1 THESSALONIANS 5:12** and **PHILIPPIANS 2:29**. Listen to those two verses: "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you"; and speaking of Epaphroditus, a minister from Philippi the Apostle admonished the readers to "honour such men."

The Congregation of the Lord will honour the elder whom God appoints through accepting responsibility to care for his needs. In his first letter to Timothy the Apostle provides instructions detailing the manner in which a congregation is to treat ministers. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages'" [**1 TIMOTHY 5:17, 18**]. The Apostle teaches that the elders—the overseers—are to be supported generously so that they will be free to serve without hindrance which might otherwise arise from financial constraint.

The congregation honours the minister as they protect the man of God from unjust accusation. The minister is vulnerable by virtue of his position. If he does his work well it is a given that he will irritate or anger some individuals; it may well be that some individuals decide they will rid themselves of their nemesis through bringing damning accusations against the man of God. To counteract such evil Paul pens these words: "Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear" [**1 TIMOTHY 5:19, 20**]. This is not a mechanism designed to ensure that a minister can avoid justice; rather it is a shield against frivolous and unjust accusations. The congregation honours Christ the Lord through protecting the servant of Christ whom He has appointed.

One author instructs readers how they may honour Christian workers. In **HEBREWS 13:7** we read: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” In **VERSE 17** of that same chapter we see: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” The author states that the manner in which godly leaders live out their lives is worthy of imitation; thus, the leaders are to be obeyed, the obedience growing out of respect. Clearly the context implies that obedience lies within the realm of moral and spiritual instruction. Ministers and church leaders are not to be obeyed blindly in every field of life.

On occasion I have had sincere people object to me that adopting such instructions may lead to tyranny—that leaders will take advantage of the situation to advance themselves. In the first place, such sentiment is an appeal to worldly thinking that relies upon written rules instead of the development of mutual trust and respect. All the regulations in the world will not stop an unworthy minister from injuring a congregation. Furthermore, expression of such a sentiment neglects the fact that the servant of Christ is precisely that—a servant! While the minister does possess a spiritual authority, he always holds in mind the knowledge that he must give an accounting to Christ for his ministry as is so clearly stated in Peter’s letter [see **1 PETER 5:1-4**].

It is perhaps important to point out that spiritual authority will be revealed through the shepherd’s care of the people of God. Neither vestments nor clerical collar nor statement from the pulpit nor board will ever secure the respect which genuine care obtains. One demonstration of pastoral oversight is worth a thousand pronouncements by a board. When the Head of the church gives the pastoral gift it is for the blessing of all. To flaunt His gift or to refuse recognition of it is to ignore and despise the Head Himself. On the other hand, to confuse the pastoral gift with the so-called clerical order is utterly unscriptural. No amount of training or ecclesiastical recognition can make a man a pastor. The Head of the church Himself gives such gifts to His people. Underscore this one great thought in your mind. Either the church is a spiritual entity and Christ is actually present among His people to provide for them, or the church is merely another religious organisation, meaning that one thought is as good as another.

The relationship of a pastor to a congregation is a relationship of trust. This is the reason that immorality disqualifies a minister from continuing in the pastoral relationship; the overseer is to be a one-woman man [cf. **1 TIMOTHY 3:2**]. Assuredly I would hope that the congregation which discovers such betrayal would minister to the man caught in that sin and that they would restore such a one; but let no one doubt that immorality disqualifies the minister from continuing in the pastoral relationship because the minister has violated a community trust vested in him.

Likewise, the minister must trust the congregation. Blessed is the congregation which allays the concerns of the minister, setting that man free from financial need that he might give himself to the oversight of the church, setting that man free from fear of unjust attack that he may speak the Word of God fearlessly, setting that man free from concern of rebellion in the midst of the assembly that he may continue to serve Christ and the people of God, setting that man free to focus on spiritual leadership that he may provide an example worthy of emulation. May God give us more such men of God and more such congregations that the presence of Christ may be apparent to the peoples about us and in our day.

**THE MACEDONIANS WERE SURRENDERED TO GOD'S WILL** — Paul's commendation of the Macedonian Christians reveals his confidence that these saints were fully surrendered to the will of God. Their submission to mastery by the Christ was evident in their respect for their spiritual leaders and in their response to genuine Christian need. Perhaps the greatest condemnation of contemporary Christianity is that the life of the church demonstrates a failure to submit to the mastery of Christ. Leadership in the congregation is too often seen as opportunity to seize power, opportunity to dominate, opportunity to enhance stature in the eyes of a watching world. Thus, the charge may fairly be laid to the door of far too many contemporary Christian leaders that they have exalted "self" at the cost of dethroning Christ.

The question that should challenge each one who names the Name of Christ is, "Have I given myself first to the Lord?" The corollaries include such questions as these that follow. "Are we honouring Him through surrender of every aspect of life to Him and to His rule? Does our chequebook reflect His mastery? Do our actions day-by-day demonstrate His reign over us? Would friends, family and colleagues recognise that He is our Master by our manner of life?" None but the individual can provide answer to this vital, penetrating question. As an elder I am obligated to seek your best spiritual interest. As a servant of the Lord Christ I am obligated to present the challenge which will lead to fresh commitment to Him and which will lead us into renewal of life. We must each answer individually the question of who reigns over our life. As a congregation, we must collectively answer the same question, "Who reigns over the life of this assembly?" Is the mastery of Christ the Lord evident in how we conduct our lives?

I recommend that we take time even now to review our lives in order to determine whether we measure up to the model presented by the Macedonian Christians. I further recommend that we each consider how we conduct our life to discover whether we can say with conviction that we are surrendered to the will of God. I also recommend that each of us weigh whether we are reflecting His mastery through daily life.

Perhaps it is time that we again use the altar, as did our forebears. To confess Christ as Saviour and to seek the salvation which He freely offers all who come, come now to this altar and seek the face of the gracious Lord of Glory. To turn from a life lived for self and to commit yourself to living for the glory of God through identification with Christ and with His church, come and make that commitment today. To repent of a life wasted and used for your own purpose, the invitation today is to come, and kneeling at the altar seek forgiveness from Him whose right it is to forgive. To seek restoration to service I invite you to come kneel before the Master and to seek renewal of appointment to His service. To seek guidance for future service and to implement His will in your life this day, kneel before the Master and enquire of Him how you should direct your life.

Some today need to confess Christ openly as it is written: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. This is the invitation of our gracious Lord to confess His Name openly and to acknowledge Him publicly as Master of life.

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Some this day need to come to unite with this congregation. Christians join the church through openly requesting the people of God to receive them as fellow members; and other some today have yet to identify openly with Christ and His people. He taught us that all who are saved are to identify through baptism after believing. The invitation to you who are yet unbaptised, to you who have yet to confess Christ publicly in His way is to come that you may identify with Christ through that precious rite He approved and Himself received at John's hand. It is written: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" [ACTS 2:38].

Other some of you may recognise the need to confess hidden sin, secret failure. Here at an old fashioned altar you may kneel and seek the restoration which will set you free to be all that the Master would desire. Perhaps it is that you realise the need of the prayers of God's people for some specific lack in your life—a challenge which lies beyond your ability to meet or a concern which burdens your life. Come, acknowledge that concern or challenge; the people of God will rejoice at the opportunity to join you in prayer seeking the power of God as He answers. You come as we stand and as we sing. May angels attend you in the way as you come. Amen.