

GRACE GIVEN 2 CORINTHIANS 8:9

“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”¹

We want to worship in a manner acceptable to God. We want to glorify His Name and honour Him. Nowhere is this more important than when we administer the goods of this earth. Endeavouring to instruct the congregation in this neglected facet of worship, I initiated a series of expositions through the eighth and ninth chapters of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. Those studies addressed the misunderstood and frequently ignored aspect of worship that we know as giving.

In order to ensure that we share a common foundation in worship through giving, I invite you to join me in reviewing the components of grace giving we have already discovered from previous messages covering these chapters. Grace giving is first of all **worship**. Underscore in your mind that the act of giving is an act of worship which transforms mere duty to the highest act expected of any mere mortal. Grace giving is the expected outflow of the heart which has been set free by the love of God in Christ and which recognises the loving sacrifice of Jesus our Lord. As to the components defining grace giving, we have seen that grace giving is **voluntary** giving akin to providing a firstfruit offering. Before the harvest is complete, before the result of the harvest is known, in faith the one making the offering gives the first portion of the harvest to God as an act of faith. Before we make any payments, before making any purchase, our gift ought to be set aside to present before the Lord.

Grace giving is **sacrificial** giving, revealing a heart which is not overly attached to possessions. Grace giving is always **generous**. Grace giving reveals a heart in love with Christ because the one giving has received the gracious gift of life. How can one in love with Christ be anything other than generous? Grace giving is giving which is **thoughtful** and **responsive**. In grace giving, we are to think about the amount we will give and determine how we will give. We are responsible to know that those receiving the donations administer the funds wisely and in accordance with the will of God. This is the reason I encourage members to study the budget of the church and to voice their desires. The budget is in reality a spiritual document providing guidance for the growth and the progress of the congregation. We are also responsible to respond to needs as they develop.

Grace giving is to be **systematic, proportionate** and **faithful**. We are to give regularly and consistently, as often as we receive income and in such a manner that those dependent upon the gifts can know that needs will be cared for. We realise that the more Christ entrusts to us the greater our responsibility to give generously. I do not expect an individual on a fixed income to give the same percentage of an individual with a growing income. I do not expect an individual with income barely sufficient for daily survival to give the same percentage of one who has more than sufficient income. I do expect all who know Christ and who seek His glory to give! Thus, grace giving reflects **spiritual maturation**. The spiritually mature understand that how we handle money speaks volumes about our relationships. We are stewards over all that God has given into our care and we are responsible to answer to Him for our administration of those goods.

¹ 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.

Reviewing what has been presented, we know that grace giving is an act of **worship**. Such giving is **voluntary, sacrificial** and **generous**. It is giving that is **thoughtful** and **responsive**; and it is **systematic, proportionate** and **faithful**. Grace giving reflects **spiritual maturity**.

The concept of grace is essentially foreign to the human mind—not that we do not long to receive grace from others. Though we may attempt to practise a pale imitation of mercy and though we each wish to receive grace from others, our fallen condition conspires to ensure that the consistent practise of grace is difficult if not impossible. Nevertheless, not a single Christian can deny that she has received grace from the Lord God.

Most any child of God can define grace and most are able to give a standard definition of sorts in an effort to explain this divine characteristic. Most of the people of God expect to grow in grace, to progress toward fuller understanding of grace and to reveal a richer expression of the grace of God through life; however, the concept of grace is more easily experienced than it is explained. One area in which grace is experienced regularly within the Body of Christ is through the act of giving. In past messages I have introduced the concept of **grace giving**, attempting to demonstrate that through implementing such a concept to control our giving we worship the God of grace and at the same time step toward fuller expression of His grace as we so act.

Of course, outsiders expect Christians to practise grace giving, although they could not articulate why they expect such practise. It is fascinating to me to discover that unbelievers turn almost naturally to the church for assistance when in need, whether financial or physical, anticipating that they will receive help. Usually, these individuals seeking help have no intention to either become Christians or to participate in the life of the particular assembly from which they receive aid. They hold such expectations because they are convinced that Christians are **grace givers**, that Christians reflect the grace of God through giving. Food banks and clothing warehouses and homeless shelters are often associated in people's minds with churches, governments being but latecomers to the provision and support of such facilities. Churches are traditionally easy marks for financial assistance when welfare fails to meet expectations.

One interesting aspect concerning this issue of expectation of outsiders is that while they believe that Christians should practise grace giving, Christians themselves are unclear on the concept of grace giving. Frequently, believers have failed to understand that **grace giving** begins in the service of the church, and more particularly that such practise should be seen routinely in the act of worship through giving. The foundation for grace giving is, unsurprisingly, Christ Himself. Of His grace we have each received abundantly. From His grace we are each enabled to give abundantly. Focus with me now on the grace of our Lord Jesus, exploring three aspects which reveal His grace according to Paul's assessment.

THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS IS SEEN IN HIS GLORIOUS WEALTH. The grace of Christ is seen first in His wealth. Paul says of Christ the Lord, "He was rich." When we speak of material wealth, we tend to think of possessions—of real property, of commodities and goods. Unconsciously, we equate possessions with power. The one with great possessions has power, or ability to make things happen. We imagine that needs evaporate in the presence of wealth. Want and penury are unknown to the one with wealth. Power to control the actions of others is associated, either consciously or unconsciously, with wealth.

From an earthly viewpoint, it would be quite correct to speak of Christ's richness as being revealed in His possessions. In the Word we are told that "the cattle on a thousand hills" belong to the Lord God of Heaven [PSALM 50:10]. Likewise, in PSALM 24:1 we discover that:

"The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein."

Throughout the Old Covenant are found statements related to God's wealth. One such statement is recorded in the Chronicles of Judah. At the time he was transferring the Kingdom to Solomon, David praised God and spoke of God's wealth. "David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: 'Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name' [1 CHRONICLES 29:10-13].

David teaches in this passage that God possesses wealth, and he acknowledges that God is the source of all human wealth and goods. God is generous toward mankind. This is the basis for James' statement, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" [JAMES 1:17]. Think about that when you consider your personal holdings! Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive" [1 CORINTHIANS 4:17]? And the appropriate answer to the questions is, "Nothing." God gave us all in the final accounting.

This theme of divine wealth shared with mankind is repeated in DEUTERONOMY 8:17, 18. There, God has warned His people, "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day." In these verses God promised to bless His people with earthly riches; and then He cautioned those same people against succumbing to the lure of imagining that they had secured this wealth through their own strength. God gives wealth since it is His to give.

This same truth is witnessed when Solomon writes, "Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God" [ECCLESIASTES 5:18, 19].

Then, the Preacher appends this caution, "There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous evil" [ECCLESIASTES 6:1, 2]. God gives wealth because wealth is God's to give. Note this truth: God possesses all—including what we commonly call wealth. We may accumulate wealth or goods; but having gathered wealth we are responsible to administer what God has permitted us to gather.

God is the source of all wealth, whether the wealthy recognise the fact or not; wealth is given as a stewardship for which those holding wealth are responsible. Consider two other statements which speak of God's wealth and of His generosity. We've already seen James' statement: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" [JAMES 1:17]. Even those elements that enrich life though they are not greatly esteemed until they are removed are gifts from God. Even those aspects of life which we take for granted because they are common have been given by our God; and we are responsible to administer His gift with wisdom.

The Apostle, cautioning against dependence upon earthly goods, wrote his protégé Timothy. "As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy" [1 TIMOTHY 6:17]. The point must be stressed because we are prone to become so focused on possessions that we forget that just as goods are given by God, they can also be removed by God. We are to place our hope in God because God alone constitutes true wealth.

Knowing God constitutes true wealth because of God's power. Because He is Creator, God possesses all that has been created. Thus, God exercises authority over all creation. This was seen clearly in Christ's repeated demonstrations of mastery over nature. He changed water into wine [JOHN 2:1-11]. He spoke and storms ceased their raging [LUKE 8:24]. He walked atop the waves in the midst of fierce winds [JOHN 6:19, 20]. When He multiplied barley loaves and small fishes, multitudes were fed and were sated [JOHN 6:1-13]. When religious leaders were offended because he did not play their game of paying taxes for the support of their religion, he used a fish to pay them in appropriate coinage [MATTHEW 17:27]. Queried by disciples of John the Baptist He pointed to blind people who now saw, pointed to those who had been lame and were now walking about, pointed to those who had been leprous and were now cured and clean before the demands of the law, pointed to those who had been deaf who could hear and He pointed to dead people raised from their biers [MATTHEW 11:4]. Jesus is Master of all creation; and He is master over sin. He alone can forgive sin. He alone can remove all taint of contamination.

His power is greater than we can ever imagine; has He not testified, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" [MATTHEW 28:18]. Those words condemn the outsider through confronting that outsider with the knowledge that the same Jesus he has rejected as Saviour and Lord shall be his Judge. This is consistent with Jesus' words in JOHN 5:22, 23, 26, 27. "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him... As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given Him authority to execute judgement, because He is the Son of Man." Surely, the thought that Jesus possesses all authority condemns the sinful soul.

Those same words can also comfort. Because Jesus possesses all authority the child of God can affirm, "We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” [ROMANS 8:28-39].

The grace of our Lord Jesus is seen in His presence with His people, revealed through the certainty that His power is ever reserved for our good and for His glory, evident in the confidence that He watches over us to insure that His will is accomplished in each life and to insure that we shall suffer no injury or reversal of fortune save that which is permitted by a God too good to ever hurt us needlessly and too wise to ever make a mistake. We are comforted by the knowledge that Jesus Christ reigns, and that His power is ours.

THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS IS SEEN IN HIS VOLUNTARY IMPOVERISHMENT. “For your sake He became poor...” — This clause is represented in our English version as beginning with the conjunction “yet.” The use of that wee word focuses our thoughts on all that has preceded this affirmation. By employing that singular word, Paul displayed the power and glory of Christ the Lord in stark contrast to His voluntary impoverishment for the benefit of His people. It is apparent that this contrast between divine impoverishment and earthly enrichment constitutes a theme throughout the Word of God. In **2 CORINTHIANS 5:21** Paul writes of Jesus that “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” The divine mystery is that the Sinless One became sin so that sinful people might be made righteous. Was Jesus a “sin offering?” Or did He become sin? Theologians fight about the meaning of the words; however, what is apparent is that the grace of God startles us in this inequitable exchange. Imagine! God took upon Himself our sin so that we would not be accountable for our own wickedness! Christ the Lord has done this for us.

The infinite contrast again appears in another well-known passage, **PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8**. There we read, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” No mere mortal can grasp what it means that God emptied Himself for our benefit. Nevertheless, that is the grace we have received.

Explore this contrast as witnessed in one further statement. “In [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” [COLOSSIANS 1:19, 20].

Charles Wesley wrote some of the most glorious and most beautiful hymns in the English tongue; one hymn that is greatly loved is “And Can It Be.” The second verse of that hymn addresses the divine inequity of infinite wealth exchanged for earthly sin.

Tis mystery all! Th’Immortal dies!
Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine!
‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds inquire no more.

Though I can never hope to grasp the magnitude of the contrast between the Master’s wealth and how He emptied Himself for mankind, it will nevertheless be helpful to explore the Apostle’s choice of words. Paul compares the infinite with the finite attempting to draw a contrast between the grace of God and the penury resulting from man’s sinful condition. In order to accomplish this goal he points to Christ’s willingness to exchange heaven’s splendour for earth’s squalor. Though we consider this world beautiful, we are convinced that in contrast to the unseen beauty of Heaven this must surely be a poor place to live. Just so, when Paul attempted to explore the grace of Christ, he chose a word that spoke of destitution, of beggary, of incomparable privation and poverty. No individual could ever explain the exaggerated contrast between the Lord’s glory and the mortal condition He voluntarily took upon Himself.

Any of us may consider ourselves poor at a given time (generally our sense of poverty intensifies as April 30th nears); but our concept of poverty is a comparative condition where we compare ourselves to others or compare ourselves to situations which we previously may have endured. Few of us know what it is to go to bed with empty stomachs. Few of us have ever worried about where we would sleep at night. Few of us have ever concerned ourselves with whether we would be clothed during a coming day. We have transportation, allowing for enviable mobility compared to much of the world. Admittedly, our sense of poverty is relative.

Other than its use to describe the Master’s poverty, the word Paul used speaks of situations that are readily understood by any of us. The Macedonian churches were said to be impoverished [see 2 CORINTHIANS 8:2]. Additionally, you may recall the poverty that describes the Church at Philippi and that of the Thessalonian saints; their sense of destitution and penury was marked. Jesus said the Church at Smyrna was afflicted and impoverished [see REVELATION 2:9]. Studies of the conditions in which this church existed demonstrate that they were severely persecuted and left utterly destitute through the actions of their enemies.

Lynda and I felt ourselves impoverished after arranging for repeated flights for our daughter to travel back and forth to school. Compounding our sense of impoverishment were those few times we flew back east to visit her, such as to attend a graduation ceremony. However, we could not claim we were destitute.

When our children were still living at home, expenses arising from education and the demands of providing health care for a growing family often left us feeling impoverished. Nevertheless, we could not say we were destitute.

I share these personal examples to emphasise that Paul chose the most extreme word imaginable when comparing Jesus' sacrifice for fallen mankind. The Master's situation was so extreme as to be almost unimaginable. Christ the Lord moved from extreme to extreme; and it is precisely because He alone was capable of moving from extreme to extreme that none of us can ever hope to comprehend the magnitude of His grace. Though we may experience that grace revealed in His bridging the gap, we cannot explain it.

Had Christ sacrificed His life for His friends, we might speak of that sacrifice as noble and even commendable. Had the Master sacrificed Himself for those deemed worthy of His love, we might comprehend that. This is the basis for the Apostle's argument in **ROMANS 5:6-8**: "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Note the contrast—the powerful died for the powerless, the sinless was slain for sinners.

Occasionally some good person may die for an exceptional individual, but that is not God's way. Christ gave Himself for rebels—for men and women guilty of the most heinous sins, people guilty of insubordination to the Holy One, guilty of insurgency against heaven, guilty of mutiny against mercy, guilty of sedition against glory, guilty of lèse majesté to God Himself. We often appear unconscious of how dreadful our sins against the Lord God actually are. I sometimes wonder if we Christians have become so jaded by continual exaltation of rugged individualism as an ideal and through uniting in the cult of individual rights that we no longer are shocked by the horror of our revolt against God and against righteousness.

We contemporary Christians give the impression that we actually believe we can make it alone without help from any other believer! We glory in our ability to ignore personal weakness and injury to push forward on our own. Someone has compared the modern church to a dance by porcupines on a frigid night. We are cold, and we try to huddle close to one another. However, pushing close to one another, our quills poke and rankle each of us.

Nevertheless, we Christians have impoverished ourselves in ways unseen; and for the remainder of our days we suffer because we lied to ourselves. Angered because God did not give in to our infantile demands, we react as mere babies and throw a tantrum, removing ourselves from fellowship with our fellow saints, never once understanding that it was for our good that God designed our path. It was for precisely such ignorant, rebellious, deceived individuals that now make up the church for whom Christ died; and it is just such childish, unprincipled babes whom God loves. Who can explain this grace?

THE GRACE OF OUR LORD JESUS IS WITNESSED BY HIS ENDOWMENT. "By his poverty [you have] become rich..." — The contrast between Christ's wealth and His voluntary impoverishment is made complete when the Apostle turns the imagery back to the Corinthians. By their own estimate the Corinthian Christians were rich; but their wealth had no impact on the greater Body of Christ.

They came to the Lord's Table without regard for those who had little of this world's goods, and received the Apostle's stern rebuke. "When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing" [1 CORINTHIANS 11:20-22]?

Recall the biting sarcasm the Apostle used when confronting the attitudes of these saints in Corinth in his earlier words recorded in 1 CORINTHIANS 4:8-10. ***"Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!*** And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute." In contrasting their self-estimate to reality, Paul revealed that the Corinthian Christians held attitudes that could be found within congregations of too many modern Canadian Christians!

What is intriguing is that the Corinthians really were rich, but in ways they could not see. Just so, every Christian has already been enriched with true wealth through the divine exchange. A short while ago I focused on the concept of poverty which Paul used. He used a rare word reserved in the New Testament, other than in our text, to describe churches which were utterly destitute. The word Paul used in speaking of Christ's divine wealth is much less rare, however. The word occurs over forty times in the New Testament. Except when used of Christ, the word has a somewhat negative connotation. For instance, the rich exploit the poor [see JAMES 2:5, 6] and are tempted to depend upon their own wealth instead of God [see 1 TIMOTHY 6:17]. In contrast, God is rich in mercy [see EPHESIANS 2:4] and Christ was rich in glory according to our text. We may conclude, then, that the wealth of this world is transient, tending to create illusions of security while the wealth we inherit in Christ is permanent and eternally secure.

As Christians, we are rich in that we have received mercy beyond comprehension. Heaven's wealth gains us access to the throne of God where we are promised not simply a hearing but an answer to every request presented in the Name of Christ and according to the will of the Father [see JOHN 14:13, 14]. All our sins have been forgiven and we are now called by the Name of the Lord God [see EPHESIANS 1:7]. We have received wisdom and understanding and full knowledge of God's will [see EPHESIANS 1:8, 9]. We are promised an inheritance which, however great it may be, is beggared by the knowledge that we have received God Himself as our Father [see EPHESIANS 1:3-6]. If somehow all this were not enough, we have received hope in this world and the presence of God's Spirit as a guarantee of all that is to come [see EPHESIANS 1:10-14].

Outside of Christ we were held in thralldom to fear; in Christ we enjoy liberty and rejoice in His grace. When we were outside of Christ we had "no hope and [were] without God in the world" [EPHESIANS 2:12]; in Christ we are seized by infectious hope, enjoying intimacy with the Father. Outside of Christ we knew turmoil and conflict; in Christ we enjoy peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace in the world [see EPHESIANS 2:14]. Outside of Christ we were "strangers and aliens" to grace; in Christ we are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God [EPHESIANS 2:19].

Now we have witnessed the contrast and we have at least a foundation for understanding one of the major motives Paul presents for grace giving. Paul is not commanding us to emulate Christ through adopting voluntary poverty; he is pointing to His grace so that we may discover the principle of equality in giving. You will perhaps remember that he began by pointing to the Macedonian Christians as examples. He has now moved to the source of their generosity and participation in the advance of the word of God's Kingdom—Christ Himself.

Every act of worship flows out of recognition of Christ's grace. Since giving is an act of worship, it follows that it must reflect understanding of the greatness of Christ's grace. The greatness of our giving is measured not by the amount we give but by the love and devotion lying behind our gifts. The measure of our comprehension of God's grace is seen not in the size of our gifts, but it is seen in the sacrifice underpinning our giving. Grace giving frees us from law and frees us to live according to the example we have witnessed in Christ Jesus our Lord. We ask of those who share in our worship through giving only that they know the grace of God in Christ and that they rejoice in His grace. We ask that there be no grudging giving, that there be no sense of distress in giving, but that all who participate rejoice in the grace and goodness of God. I shall be quick to say, however, that if one refuses to give, or if one is stinting in giving, that one knows little of worship and he demonstrates that he knows little of grace.

And that is our invitation to you. The grace of God is seen in the exchange of the sinless Son of God for sinful humans—and that includes me just as it includes you. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." Our invitation to you is to experience this rich gift of life, of intimacy, of peace and joy, of access and freedom, knowing that though "the wages of sin is death ... the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" [**ROMANS 6:23**]. Amen.