

**Date:** 21<sup>st</sup> July 2019

**Talk:** Peregian

**Passage:** 2 Cor 8: 1-9

**Title:** Giving as a grace and a privilege

Many many Christmases ago (well maybe 15 or so)

Phil and I decided that we would have a charity Christmas.

All the presents for our family came from the World Vision catalogue.

Hopefully you know what I mean by this;

It's where you give money on behalf of someone else

for a specific aid purpose such as medical or educational supplies

Or a goat or clean drinking water.

We had fun going through the catalogue,

matching gifts to individual family members.

And at Christmas, instead of a present,

there was a card for each of them from World Vision

telling them what had been given on their behalf.

Thankfully this went down very well with most of my family members.

However my 6 year old nephew Tom was a little confused when he opened his envelope.

We had bought on his behalf 6 chickens for a family in Peru.

So he received a card with a picture of some happy looking,

but clearly very poor, children

one of them was holding a rooster

and there were a few chickens pecking the ground around them.

The questioning that followed was both challenging and highly entertaining.

Are these my chickens – my actual chickens?

So where are they?

When will I get them?

Oh, well why have these people got my Christmas present?

Can I at least have one of them?

Well then, can I go and visit them?

Highly entertaining for the rest of the family ,

but quite challenging for Phil and I to answer all this.

However, when we explained the good things these chickens would do

for this very poor family

That they would have eggs to eat

They'd be able to raise chicks and then sell them.

Tom didn't just accept the outcome,

he was actually very pleased and happy at what his present meant.

Yes it was a fun Christmas

But it really brought home to me how tough it can be

to teach kids about giving to others.

And in reality it's tough to teach this at any age

but here I am teaching about Giving!

This is the first of two talks on this subject

Today looking at the Grace and Privilege of Giving

And then next week

Mark will talk about Planned, Generous and Cheerful Giving

Now, of course we all give in many different ways

Caring for family members

Looking after our neighbours

Serving in different ways here each Sunday

But let me be honest about this morning's talk,

It's about money.

Do you know, when I finished my time as church treasurer,

I thought I could get away from standing in front of you

And talking about this.

But no, here I am, talking about money again.

And let me tell you

your life, and mine, would be so much easier

if I could stand here and say "the answer is 10%"!

Oh that it was as easy as this.

Because then we'd all understand what we should do in this uncomfortable area of giving.

And we'd know whether or not we were stepping up,

meeting what God asks of us.

But sorry, no, the answer is not 10%.

This concept of tithing or giving 10% related to a very specific purpose in Old Testament times

It was part of the old covenant with God

And, as we know, with the coming of Jesus this old covenant is gone

And that includes this formula for giving – it's gone.

In fact there's no set % or value or monetary guideline given anywhere in the New Testament

To help us know the exact amount for our offering.

Nor are there any specific guidelines about giving to mission partners, to charity, to aid appeals.

So the bad news is, I don't have an easy answer for you.

But what I hope to do this morning

is to help with some context for thinking this through

by showing how these two concepts of grace and privilege

can re-shape our whole attitude to giving.

So let's turn to our passage this morning

I hope you still have it in front of you – page 966

First of all some background.

Judea had been suffering a famine for many years,

And as a result, many of the Christians in and around Jerusalem

were living in extreme poverty.

So Paul was asking for aid from all the Gentile churches

to help these Jewish Christians.

He wanted to demonstrate that, regardless of whether they were Jew or Gentile,

they were all united under Christ.

So wherever he went,

he told the Gentile churches about the need in Jerusalem.

Paul actually writes this letter to the gentile church in Corinth

While he was visiting other gentile churches in Macedonia

So he's able to tell the Corinthians first hand

about the amazing generosity of these churches.

Now these Macedonian churches themselves were going through a pretty tough time.

They too were struggling with poverty.

And they also were dealing with intense persecution

In fact they were in a very similar state to the very churches Paul was seeking aid for.

So with this background in mind, let's look at verse 1 of our passage

And start thinking about the relationship between grace and giving.

Paul says to the Corinthians

*we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*

Now pause a minute.

Having read this first sentence,

Where Paul opens by talking about God's grace to the Macedonians

it would be reasonable to expect that Paul would go on to say something like

"through the generosity of all the other churches

we have been able to provide aid to these Macedonian churches"

That would make sense, wouldn't it?

Paul is seeking aid for poverty stricken churches,

So, by God's grace, surely the Macedonians would be recipients of this aid.

But no, God's grace to the Macedonians

is not about bringing them relief from their affliction

Look at verse 2

The grace God gives to the Macedonians is that

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

How on earth does that work?

It seems completely counter intuitive to relate severe trial and extreme poverty

with overflowing joy and rich generosity.

But that's the wonder of God's grace isn't it.

This is the transforming power of his grace,

at work in the churches of Macedonia.

Despite the circumstances in which they are living,

They are filled with joy.

Why?

Because they know what God has done for them.

They know Jesus.

They know what the future holds for them.

And so they are overflowing with joy.

As Paul put it in a letter he wrote to the Thessalonians, one of the Macedonian churches,

*you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.*

The joy given by the Holy Spirit, because of God's grace to them.

And look at the effect this has on their giving.

They didn't look at their budgets;

They didn't first work out how much they needed for themselves;

They didn't calculate 10% of their income

No, look at verse 3:

*they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.*

They were so carried away by their joy in the gospel message

that they gave more than they could afford.

Not only that, but they were eager to give.

In fact Paul tells us in vs 4 they pleaded with him to be allowed to give,

Because they saw it as a privilege,

A privilege to be able to give money away!!!

Why – well because they saw it as sharing in God's work.

They saw it as a privilege that God could work through them

A privilege to be able to help the needy

A privilege to help in the work of spreading the gospel

Is this what's in your mind when you think about how much to put in the collection each week,

or when you look each year at how much your regular bank transfer to the church should be

Do you think about the fact that the money you give

is a way of you sharing in God's work?

And, do you see it as a privilege to be able to give your money in this way?

Let me be honest!

That's not really what's foremost in my mind when Phil and I discuss this at home.

We give monthly through the bank,

and typically we review how much we give at the start of each year.

We pray about it and then...

well we consider things like:

How much did we give last year?

What's inflation currently running at?

Has our income gone up or down?

How are the church finances looking?

And really,

it comes down to a question of whether we feel we are giving a reasonable amount.

But that's where the issue lies,

In the things that shape our view of "reasonable"

Is our view of reasonable shaped by God's views and priorities

or is it shaped by our worldly views and our priorities?

It's an uncomfortable thing to think about isn't it?

To face up to what really shapes our decision about our giving to the church.

And that's an interesting phrase I've just used

giving to the church –

those are my words, but is this how you think about your offering?

That you are giving money to the church.

How might our approach change if,

instead of thinking about giving to "the church"

We think about our giving as a way of "sharing in God's work".



It's really about a change of attitude isn't it?

Look at the attitude of the Macedonians

despite their own poverty,

they gave enthusiastically – they actually begged to be able to give.

And they counted their contribution to God's work as a privilege.

Attitude is critical when it comes to giving.

In fact the more we study the Bible on this subject,

The more we discover that God is much more concerned with the attitude of the giver

than he is with the amount of the gift.

In other words, God is interested in what's going on in our hearts,

not in our bank accounts.

As Jesus said in Matthew 21

*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*

Do we treasure the things of this world or do we treasure what God' treasures?

The star giver in the New Testament isn't someone who gives away thousands,

It's a woman who contributes a few cents.

Why is she the star?

Because she possessed the right attitude towards giving.

In Jesus' words

*"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."*

Her attitude to giving is exactly that of the Macedonians.

Not counting how much she had and how much she needed,  
instead giving everything she had.

Very much like the Macedonian churches.

But what was it that brought about this attitude of overwhelming generosity?

Just think, these churches would have been full of fairly new Christians.

After all, this letter was written only around 25 years after Jesus lived.

And we know from many church studies

that it can take quite some time

for new Christians to mature into generous givers.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, once wrote

*"there are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind, and the conversion of the purse."*

And Charles Spurgeon said,

*"With some, the last part of their nature that ever gets sanctified is their pockets."*

But yet here, in the Macedonian churches, we have the example of a newish bunch of Christians

with an attitude of overwhelming generosity.

Why?

Because they got it.

The gospel message was alive and real to them in a way that changed everything.

They understood the incredible nature of what Jesus had done for them.

And as a result they saw their lives as his and not their own.

Look at Vs 5 *They gave themselves first of all to the Lord*

The gave themselves to the Lord

Because he had bought their lives with his,

And because they had the utmost trust in his love and care for them.

After all he had just died for them.

So their preeminent concern was how best to serve Jesus.

They gave, out of their poverty

because of the sincerity of their commitment to Jesus as their Lord.

This is the key to a giving, generous heart.

A true, deep, life-changing understanding of what Jesus has done for us.

Because when we truly understand the magnitude of this

We can't help but respond by giving our whole life to him.

And when we put Jesus first, everything else ,

including our money, our material possessions,

our security in and desire for worldly things,

will hold a very different place in our hearts.

When Jesus truly is Lord of our lives

Our attitude is not

“can I be a bit more generous, can I give a bit more”

No, the true Christian attitude is,

"It's all yours, Lord. Whatever you tell me to do with it, I'll do, because it belongs to you, not to me."

In the end it's not about money at all.

It's about our understanding of the enormity of the price that was paid for us

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,

the heir of all things,

Gave all this up for us.

He voluntarily laid down his crown,

He emptied himself of all the riches and glory that were his due.

And instead took on the life of a poor Jewish carpenter,

Humbled himself completely,

And then died for us.

Died so that our future could be assured,

where unimaginable riches and joy await us.

This is what needs to sink down so deeply in us

that it changes every aspect of the way we live.

So when Paul writes to the Corinthians about this matter of giving,

He doesn't say they must or should give.

He doesn't lay a burden of guilt on them.

He doesn't put them in competition with the Macedonians

You can just see it can't you

On the side of the church building

Two giant red thermometers

One showing how much the Macedonians had given

And one showing the Corinthian giving.

No, there is none of this. There is no pressure.

"I am not commanding you," he says.

His argument is this,

The Macedonians gave because their love was genuine.

They were moved by the grace of God.

If you Corinthians give on that basis,

you too can demonstrate that your love is as genuine as theirs.

He's telling them that, just like all the things he listed in verse 7

giving is another mark of their faith,

a mark of a heart that has been touched by the love and grace of God.

A mark of spiritual maturity.

And this applies to us as well.

Our whole approach to giving is a mark of our spiritual maturity.

It's a mark of whether we have truly given over our lives to God.

So don't think about money,

And for heavens sake don't be guilted into feeling you need to give more.

Think instead about doing things that grow your relationship with Jesus,

Allow the enormity of God's grace to transform your heart

Open yourself up to the grace and privilege of calling Jesus Lord

And then see what happens with your attitude to giving.

Let me pray for us.

Thank you Lord for your incredible grace to us, that you became poor so that we might become rich. Please continue your transforming work in us

that we may be passionate, enthusiastic, and joyous givers. Give us wisdom to know what to give, when to give and to whom to give, and may we always be moved out of love and compassion to give generously in service to you.  
Amen