



Connect group questions

The joy of giving – Giving as a grace and a privilege

1. The Corinthians were to finish a collection (already begun) for the suffering Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:10-12) ... why were Jewish Christians hated by their own countrymen?
2. *'The last part of a sinner to be converted is his wallet'* ... what evidence in the text shows that opinion did not apply to the Macedonian Christians?
3. Our Lord's trenchant denunciation of Jewish *legalists* (in Matthew 23) proves that legalism is always a deadly enemy.
 - a) What forms of legalism were Judaizers peddling in the churches Paul planted?
 - b) What forms of legalism exist in 21st Century churches?
4. The fact that the Macedonian (gentile) collection was for Israelites is amazing. Why? (Recall Peter's vision, Acts 11).
5. The ultimate standard of gracious giving is Jesus, who *"though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich"* (8:9). Yet all these expressions are understatements! Identify the understatements in ...
 - a) *"he was rich"*
 - b) *"he became poor"*
 - c) *"so that you ... might become rich"*
6. Details aside, what **principle** of giving is expressed by 1 Corinthians 16:2 ... *"on the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income"*?
7. Discuss ... *"Like the Macedonians, our giving has to discriminate, not only between good and evil, but also between useful and useless, or gospel and secular"*.
8. *"You'll never lose by honouring God!"* Is that just a glib throw-away line? What about the martyrs who lost their lives honouring God?

Giving as a grace and privilege.

(2 Corinthians 8:1-9)

What we now call Greece was, in Biblical times, Macedonia and Achaia. *Macedonia* the northern part, included Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea where Paul founded churches. *Achaia* referred to the southern parts (like Corinth). Since Paul's first letter (57AD) the Corinthian church had been hurt by false teachers, Judaizers. They stirred the people against Paul, claiming he was fickle, proud, unimpressive in appearance and speech, dishonest, and unqualified as an apostle. Worse ... they were legalists, opposed to the gospel of free grace. They held the same core views as the Scribes and Pharisees condemned by Jesus as: blind guides, white-washed tombs, snakes, and evangelists from hell ...

"you travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are" (Matthew 23). Paul warned the Philippians about them: *"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh"* ... a reference to their dogma requiring gentiles to be circumcised (Philippians 3:2). Religious legalism is always a deadly enemy, so Paul (in Macedonia) sent Titus to Corinth to deal with these grace-killers.

He carried a strong letter from Paul that we don't have (see 2 Corinthians 2). The visit was fruitful and when Titus returned, Paul rejoiced to hear of the improvements. He then wrote this third letter (what we call 2nd Corinthians) giving thanks for the repentant majority while appealing to the rebellious minority to mend their ways. There was another purpose also ... to urge the Corinthians to fulfil their promise of taking a collection for the suffering Jewish Christians in Judea (read about it in 1 Corinthians 16).

They were to set aside money on the first day of each week so that, when Paul came down from Macedonia to visit them, he would arrange for their gift to be taken to Jerusalem. So 2nd Corinthians was sent about 6 months after 1st Corinthians, and Paul finally arrived probably early in 58AD. This collection for the Jewish Christians is the subject of chapters 8-9 (and thus our text today). We'll focus on three issues:

1. The right attitude
2. The right action
3. The right application (for us)

1. The right attitude

No doubt you've heard it said that the last part of a sinner to be converted is his wallet. That clearly did not apply to the Macedonian Christians. They didn't see giving as a hardship, or even just a duty. Three times the text says they saw it as **grace** ... a God-given missionary opportunity. Verse 1 calls it "*the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches*" (i.e. the opportunity to serve). Then it is called "*this act of grace*" (v. 6) and "*this grace of giving*" (v. 7). This attitude is all the more amazing considering their troubles:

²Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. They felt the needs of the struggling Jewish Christians more keenly than their own desperate trials and poverty. Paul is virtually lost for words, saying it was against all expectations. He had not even asked them to help ... on the contrary they begged him to let them help! It was entirely their own initiative: Entirely on their own, ⁴they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

2. The right action

The Bible nowhere commends indiscriminate charity. Godliness has to discriminate between good and evil. The Macedonians did that, discriminating between Godly Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and ungodly Jewish troublemakers ... the grace-killers opposing Jesus, his churches, and his Apostles like Paul. There is something amazing here when you consider the target of the Macedonian (gentile) gift. It is for Israelites, people who traditionally despised gentiles as unclean (remember Peter's vision, Acts 11). Jewish culture commonly referred to gentiles as *goyim*, a virtual synonym for *dogs*. Jews haughtily boasted that they alone were God's chosen people, they alone were "holy ones".

It was a matter of historical fact that gentiles were 'outsiders' ... "*excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise. Without hope and without God in the world*" (Ephesians 2:12). Remember how we studied this in some Ephesians 2 sermons? But rather than nurse their enmity or foster any racist temptations, the Macedonians were gracious beyond description! Paul is nearly lost for words! Their attitude was gospel-shaped ... gracious and generous.

Verse 5 indicates another attitude behind that attitude ... "*they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will*". They saw it as service to God first and foremost. And they saw it as an obvious support for Paul's apostleship, denying the opposition by the legalists. They discriminated between Jesus and his church ("*the Lord and us*") and those who opposed. And this discrimination was Godly, "*in keeping with God's will*". They realised that not all Israelites are in the same category. The suffering Jewish Christians belong to Jesus, but the Jewish legalists do not. Both Gentiles and Jews are the true children of Abraham ... whoever is a Christian (Romans 2). That's why Paul wants the Corinthians to follow the example of the Macedonians ... "*see that you also excel in this grace of giving*" (v 7).

3. The right application (for us)

a) See giving as a grace ... a God-given missionary opportunity. We want to see lost people embrace Christ, and when they do, we want them to feel supported and loved when they suffer for that faith. So give generously in those directions. The letter goes on to say *"God loves a cheerful giver"* (9:7) but some people cheerfully give very little. Why? Because they have never caught the gospel attitude behind it. They have never really appreciated the enormity of Christ's giving to us ... *"though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich"* (8:9).

b) Be generous! The principle is well summed up in Proverbs 3:9 ... *"Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops"*. Stingy people seem to read it as: *"Honour the Lord with your scraps and small change, and the leftovers of your crops"*. Stinginess is a dreadful curse at the best of times, but the worst place it could happen is in the church of the living God. He is the opposite of 'stingy'. He is lavish in mercy. He gave everything to us, even his only begotten Son. The tragedy is that some people worship 'the god of the leftovers', and they are utterly devoted to him! He gets all their scraps!

Honouring the Lord from our wealth is easy but Jesus really commends 'Honour the Lord from your **poverty**'. He taught that in Mark 12:41-44. When others were putting large amounts of money into the temple treasury a widow put in two small coins, equivalent to two cents. But Jesus commended her above all the others. *"I tell you the truth, 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"*.

What gospel work should you support? There are countless valid ministries, but the first priority should be your local church (assuming it is faithful to God ... if not why are you still there?). There is something essentially immoral about enjoying the benefits of a local church while not contributing to the costs. Beyond that, each individual is free to support other valid Christian works as they see fit. Better to be generous with one or two than sparing with many.

(By way of example, for many years Lesley & I supported the Christian mission "Compassion" ... sponsoring needy children so they received general education and connected with a local gospel church. There was good accountability from the mission and regular correspondence with the children via their letters (e.g. from the Philippines, Sierra Leone, and other places).

c) Giving should be intelligent and planned, not ad-hoc. That's what Paul means by *"on the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income"* (1 Corinthians 16:2). In our culture ... 'arrange your finances (credit cards, direct debits, share dividends) so that regular amounts go to support valid gospel causes'. Like the Macedonians, you have to discriminate ... not only between good and evil but useful and useless, gospel and secular.

I shudder at the millions of dollars collected by churches for useless ends (e.g. to repair archaic bell-towers) while needy gospel missions go begging. And what is the point? A bell might wake a sleeping village but only the gospel can wake the dead!

Conclusion

There are many investments where you can lose your money and have nothing but regrets. But that will never happen by putting it into legitimate works of God's kingdom. Whatever it costs to be generous, you'll never lose by honouring God! You will always be richer for it. You cannot out-give God! You cannot out-sacrifice God! You cannot end up with IOU's from God! You cannot leave God as your debtor!

"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Cor 9:6).

Christian friends, do you believe this? Let's see our giving as a grace and privilege. The old hymn says it well ...

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*