

A Study of Second Corinthians

Week Six

2 Corinthians 8:1-24

Day One

8:1 And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

8:1 – The next two chapters represent perhaps the best teaching on giving in the New Testament. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know what the Macedonian churches had been doing in regards to giving. And here we see Paul’s desire to not only have the Gentile churches learn to give, but also the Jewish churches learn to receive from their Gentile brethren. As we study this special offering for Judean relief, we cannot underestimate the role that Paul wanted this offering to play in Jerusalem. Paul was the quintessential teacher and wanted to use the Judean famine and the offering as teaching lessons for the entire church.

At the same time, I don’t want to make this sound like the offering was simply a public relations ploy on Paul’s part. He had been charged by the Jewish leaders to remember the poor and he was anxious to do just that:

They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do (Galatians 2:9-10).

v. 2 – Giving is seldom convenient but that doesn’t excuse us from performing acts of generosity. The Macedonian churches were in trying times themselves, but they gave from the midst of their poverty. Paul was impressed by their giving and used it as an example to stir others to do the same. When you give, you never know who else will act based on your example. So let’s ask right at the start: **what are you doing for the poor? You say that you are poor yourself. That doesn’t seem like it exonerates you from being generous. As we study these chapters this week and next, you may want to give some serious pray to identify sources of need that you can help meet.**

vs. 3&4 – Paul noted that they gave as they were able and even more than they were able, although he later qualified that this wasn’t the goal—that anyone to give more than they could. The Macedonians were eager to give and begged for the chance to do so. **Do you think they had a revelation about the importance of giving? Do you think they had been taught the words of Jesus and took them to heart? Do you think they wanted to obey those words? What about you? Why not find and study the words of Jesus concerning giving and then eagerly seek to apply them in your life? If you wish, you**

can then move on to study Paul's teachings on giving that are outside of chapters eight and nine.

Day Two

5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. 6 So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 But just as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

v. 5 – Leaders must remember the divine order of authority and submission. First and foremost, followers are to submit themselves to God and His word. It is *only then* that followers can give themselves to their leaders. If at any time, a leader senses that followers are reversing the order and putting the leader ahead of Christ, the leader has an obligation to address that situation and put a stop to it.

You may think that this is common sense, but it is not. As a leader, I have often sought and received obedience from the people that belongs to God and God alone. I cannot allow people to give themselves to me and think they are giving themselves to God. It must be clear to all that God has first and primary claim on anyone's life and work.

v. 6 – So Titus must have visited Corinth on more than one occasion, since he had started something that he was then urged to finish—namely, the offering for the Judean relief fund. Paul identified giving as an act of grace, the grace of God then made evident by His people as they gave. An act of grace indicates that the focus of the gift isn't on the worthiness of the recipient or the giver; rather the focus is on God, the initiator and dispenser of grace.

Notice that Paul wanted Titus to help the people bring their giving to completion. **How many times have you started out to do something good but didn't finish the job? In fact, is there any commitment, pledge or other act of mercy that you started but realize you didn't finish? What can you do today to correct that situation? We are believers are often moved by the moment and make commitments we can't or don't keep. That must change.**

v. 7 – For all their problems and challenges, the Corinthians were still the people of God who excelled in the things of the Spirit. They also excelled in faith and knowledge. What's more, they were earnest and had great love for God and their leaders. But Paul commanded them to excel in this work of giving. They had a wonderful opportunity to do good and he wanted to see them take advantage of it.

How about you? What opportunities do you have to excel in giving? What do you have to give? Don't be too quick to say that you have nothing to give. Once I was complaining that I had nothing to give friends for Christmas when the Lord reminded me that I had a wonderful library. So I took the "hint" and gave some of my best volumes

from the library as gifts. Another time I thought I could not participate in a special offering at my church, when I remembered my collection of special silver dollars that I had saved since I was a child. I sold the coins and had my offering. **So what do you have that you can give?**

Day Three

8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 10 And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. 11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.

v. 8 – Is the principle referred to here known as peer pressure? Paul wanted the Corinthians to know what the Macedonians were doing in regards to giving. He did not want to order them to give, but he wanted to inform them so that they could make a good decision on their own. Paul didn't want them to have love only for their own brethren, those whom they lived with and knew. He wanted to expand their hearts to include parts of the body of Christ whom they would never meet and with whom they had no relationship.

What are you doing for those members of the body of Christ who are in need but with whom you have no direct fellowship and contact? Also, if you are giving, are you willing for your giving to be known so that it may stir others to give as you have and are?

v. 9 – There are some who have interpreted this to mean that Jesus had worldly wealth. I think that is stretching the truth and mis-interpreting this verse. In my mind, the best interpretation for what Paul meant here is found in his letter to Philippi:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8).

Jesus emptied himself of his heavenly privileges—became poor—so that you and I might gain a right standing with God and thus become rich. Paul commanded that we have the same attitude—ready to impoverish ourselves in order to enrich others. **Do you have that attitude?**

v. 10 – Paul was very careful where other people's giving was concerned. He did not want to manipulate them; that was not his style. That is why he could confidently declare:

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions (Acts 20:33-34).

Yet it didn't mean that Paul would not make an impassioned case and plea for them to give. **What is the difference between an impassioned plea and manipulation? I think it is in the attitude toward those who give no matter how much they give.** This folly of those on television who pressure people to give a certain amount in order to receive a specific blessing is nonsense. The amount of the gift and whether the people gave at all was up to them.

When I have taken offerings, I have taught the people to focus their giving so they are giving what God wants them to give. But I also tell them that the ultimate safeguard if they think I am pressuring them simply is *not* to give. I cannot or should not reach into their pocketbook and force them to give what is not in their heart to give. We try so hard at times to get people to give for their own good that we can often force them to give, and that is wrong. If you want to give, give. Don't give, however, if you are being shamed, coerced or commanded to give.

v. 11 – We see here again the human tendency to commit and not follow through with good deeds, especially those that cannot be fulfilled in the immediacy of the moment. **Is there anything you desired to and made a commitment to do in the way of giving or good deeds that you haven't completed? What can you do to fulfill that desire or commitment now? You may have forgotten or hoped that God has forgotten. I promise you He has not.**

Day Four

12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. 13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. 14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, 15 as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

v. 12 – People must be willing to give, not coerced to give and that pertains to tithing as well. I have seen people pressured to give ten percent with the promise that God will bless them or curse them if they do or don't. The question then remains: **Are people giving because they love God or are afraid of his collection agency that will come and take from them if they don't give?**

Paul mentioned that their gifts would be acceptable if they had the right heart and followed through. But to whom would their gifts be acceptable? They would be acceptable to God, of course, and not to Paul or any other human agency. What people decide to give is between them and God and the benefit of their giving isn't the approval

of their leaders or the rewards that can be gained from such gifts. The ultimate benefit of our giving is that God accepts it. Of course He remembers and rewards, but that isn't the reason we give. We give because we love God and His people!

v. 13 – Paul made it clear that no one was to give beyond their capability. How is that possible? I would think by giving away the money they had to take care of their family and other responsibilities. Nor do I think that he is recommending that everyone have the same amount with no one having any more than others. Paul was simply bringing balance so that no one would feel pressure to give beyond their means. Someone once said that it isn't the amount that you give that counts with God, but rather the amount you have left after you give. I think this truth is borne out from the story in Luke 21:

As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on" (Luke 21:1-4).

If Paul wrote that no one should give beyond their means, and Jesus commended this woman for giving all she had to live on, what conclusion can we draw from this seeming contradiction? In my mind, this woman gave willingly and she gave to God through His human agency, the Temple. For those reasons, she caught Jesus' attention. I have to believe that God did indeed reward her for her generosity, but we don't know that for sure. But we do know she gave freely.

v. 14 – Paul had confidence that what people lacked was somewhere in the community of believers. Someone had much to meet someone else's little. This principle was first introduced in Exodus:

This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as he needs. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.'" The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Each one gathered as much as he needed. Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning" (Exodus 16:16-19).

v. 15 – We see from this that some would need more manna, like someone who had eight children while another had only two. So the equality Paul referred to wasn't an absolute equality, but a relative one. We can go on to debate how much is "enough" for any one person or family and, in today's materialistic world, which would be an intense debate. But the attitude here should be that everyone examines what they have that they don't need so they can help provide the needs of someone else.

Are you doing all you can to meet the needs of others? What more can you do? How much is enough for you? How much more can you give to bring more of a balance between you and the others in your community?

Day Five

16 I thank God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. 17 For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative. 18 And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel.

v. 16 – Paul was thankful that God had put the desire in Titus’ heart to cooperate with the collection and distribution of the special offering. Paul wanted the entire process to be spiritual, so that there was no coercion in anyone involved—leaders, givers and receivers were to be in the Spirit. I wish that some of my brothers who “shake down” the people for money would read these verses and take them to heart. Just because one is taking a “righteous” offering doesn’t justify using unrighteous means to get it. Notice that Titus and Paul were on the same page—they had unity—where this offering was concerned. Where did their unity come from? It came from God!

There is no way that we can all agree on everything. Our unity of mind and heart must come from the fact that we have plugged into the same source and that source is the Spirit of Jesus.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:3-6).

But maintaining unity requires effort and work. **Are you in agreement with the people around you? Are you letting your opinions override issues of unity?**

v. 17 – It is great to work with someone who has the same heart and who enthusiastically carries out his or her duties. Titus was a joy to work with on this project because he did things on his own initiative. Lord, help me to be that kind of employee and worker. Give me a heart to follow leadership in the unity that only you can provide. Let me be a joy to work with and not a pain in the neck for anyone.

I think every leader would enjoy people like this, but obtaining unity can be hard work. It means there must be two-way communication. It can also be time-consuming. Often strong leaders don’t want discussion that can waste valuable time. They want people to respond to them immediately and will often settle for people pretending to agree when they don’t.

I am learning to take my time and to give people every opportunity to respond with openness and honesty. **If you are a leader, can followers ask you questions? Can you give them the same time it took you to come to the conclusions you have already reached? If you are a follower, can you be more honest with your leaders? If not, why not?**

v. 18 – We don't know who the brother is who is so well-known for his service that he didn't need to be named. What a great reputation to have! **How would you like to be that well known because you knew how to serve others?** Many believe this was Luke who traveled so often with Paul. Whoever it was, he had distinguished himself the right way just like Jesus did.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28).

What can you do to become a better servant?

Day Six

19 What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help. 20 We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. 21 For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.

v. 19 – The church chose this trusted and proven servant, whoever he was, to accompany Paul and the offering to its designated recipients. Paul was administering and overseeing this gift for two reasons. The first was to honor the Lord himself. The goal of everything Paul did was to honor God. It wasn't to build his kingdom but God's kingdom.

I watch many of the Christian telethons that raise money for Christian television. Those who come in to raise these offerings are paid big money to do what they do best and that is “lift” offerings from God's people for their worthy cause. They usually promise tremendous returns for those who give these special gifts. This is absurd. Paul did not receive any personal gain from this special offering. The offering was to glorify God.

The second reason was to show both the givers and the recipients that Paul and his team were eager to help out. This was in part due to the fact that Jerusalem and Judea didn't trust Paul because he worked with so many Gentiles. I think he wanted to show them that he could be trusted and had their best interests at heart.

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come” (Acts 21:20-23).

Paul's participation was also to show the leaders in Jerusalem that he was fulfilling their instructions they gave him when he presented his gospel to the Gentiles to them. We saw earlier that Paul had written:

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do (Galatians 2:8-10).

v. 20 – Paul took companions who could help verify that the gift was delivered and used as promised to the givers. Even then, money was a sensitive subject and Paul acknowledged this. **Does your ministry give an accountability of the money raised? Do the ministries, even your churches, give an account? If not, you have to ask why not.** Paul took extra measures to insure that there was no criticism of his handling of the money. Oh, that ministries today would heed his example.

I am returning from Israel where I helped administer a tour for 81 people. That included overseeing some money. Tonight I will sit down and prepare my statement of how that money was used. If my records don't balance, then I will pay the difference.

v. 21 – It is interesting that Paul did what was right not only in the sight of God but also man. That means we should take pains to fulfill every requirement that the government puts on our record-keeping and income. Paul did not want to give the enemy of God's people any chance to accuse anyone of false dealing. Once again, I wish that my brothers and sisters in ministry would heed this model.

Day Seven

22 In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you. 23 As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. 24 Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it.

v. 22 – Was this another traveling companion or the same one that Paul referred to a few verses earlier? It seems like it is another man on the team. This man knew the Corinthians. Could it have been Apollos, who Paul reported to have been in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 3:4-6)?

Paul put a premium on zeal and enthusiasm for those who worked with him to carry out God's work. When someone has this energy, it releases a dynamic of joy that makes the work more meaningful. **If you aren't enthusiastic for what you do, why are you doing it? What changes do you need to make to connect with this energy that comes from zeal and joy? Remember what Nehemiah said:**

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

Do you have God's joy? If not, you don't have His strength. If you don't have His strength, you are using your own and that is a poor substitute. Do whatever you need to do to connect with your joy!

v. 23 – Paul positioned Titus as a partner and fellow worker. He wasn't Paul's "number two" man. Titus was a man of and worker for God in his own right. That is another thing that is so rare today. Most of your "number ones" remain number one for life. They are in no hurry to share power or position with anyone else unless it is family. The other men who were coming on the traveling team to deliver the gift were an honor to Christ. What a beautiful statement! They honored Christ just by being who they were and for doing what they did.

Paul did not give instructions that the church or the men should honor him. He did not work to establish his position as having a superior spirituality to others. He made room for the other men in the hearts and minds of the people among whom they worked. I have worked for many "men of God" and there was only room for one person in the spotlight, so to speak, and that man was them.

So I work to share credit and power, what little I have, with others. And I have been asking myself for the last few years, "Who is on my team?" I want to do all I can to help those people who are in my sphere to grow and to devote themselves to meaningful work.

v. 24 – Paul was asking the leaders, I would think, to do what they could to set these men apart as holy—consecrated for God's work. **What did Paul have in mind? I have no idea, but he wanted the Corinthians to express their love for these men in tangible ways. How do you express your love for God's workers? Do you do what you do because you have to or because someone expects you to, or is it an expression of love for the important work that they do?**