

# 52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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## 44. The Grace of Giving

### I. “Grace”: God’s goodness – to those who do not deserve it

This morning I want to talk about “grace.” Grace is defined simply as “God’s goodness,” but specifically God’s goodness to those who do not deserve to be treated with goodness. We use phrases like “undeserved blessing” or “unmerited favor” to describe the biblical doctrine of grace.

#### A. God’s grace that Saves - familiar

On one hand we’re pretty familiar with God’s grace that saves, aren’t we? We hear that preached quite a bit. We understand that we deserve nothing, deserve nothing but judgment and hell. Yet we understand that God, in his goodness, treats us with his grace and saves us. We hang on to verses like Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved, through faith and not that of yourselves, it is a gift of God, not as a result of works lest anyone should boast.”

#### B. God’s grace that Sustains – less familiar

We’re pretty familiar with the biblical doctrine of God’s grace that saves, but we’re not quite as familiar with the biblical doctrine of God’s grace that sustains. The “I need thee every hour” kind of grace. You know, after conversion you and I continue to need God’s grace. We don’t somehow become worthy after God saves us. We don’t somehow become able in and of ourselves to handle life. But we continue to need God’s grace every second of every minute of every hour of every day. So God in his goodness continues to treat us with his sustaining grace. He continues to uphold us with his sustaining grace and it is his sustaining grace that gives us the power to live out our lives in holiness. It is his sustaining grace that makes him willing to forgive us seventy times seven when we fail.

God’s saving grace and God’s sustaining grace are often combined. In 1 Corinthians 15:10 we read, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, [that’s the saving grace of God experienced in Paul’s life] and his grace [his saving grace] toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, [meaning the other apostles] though it was not I, but the grace of God [the sustaining grace of God] that is with me.” By the grace of God, Paul says, I am what I am and what I am every day is also the result of God’s ongoing grace in my life.

Passages like Titus 2 starting at verse 11 where he says, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...” We are unworthy sinners and the only path to salvation is through God’s grace that treats us with goodness when we don’t deserve it. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, [but] training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.” That’s God’s sustaining grace, isn’t it? The grace that we need day in and day out to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in

the present age. God's grace that saves. God's grace that sustains, his goodness given to undeserving and in some cases, redeemed sinners.

### **C. Sustaining grace is a radical way of thinking — counter-cultural**

I've found that sustaining grace is really a radical way of thinking; it's a very counter-cultural way to think. I think that our tendency, at least mine, is to approach life as a patchwork quilt. More and more I'm liking that metaphor. Because in one square of this patchwork quilt we acknowledge our need for God's saving grace and we understand that in that one little square, yes without God's grace, without his goodness towards an undeserving sinner, I will end up in hell. We understand that in that one little square of this patchwork quilt of our life. But then the problem is that we go on living in all the other squares of our life oblivious to the ongoing need of God's grace, whether that square is work, or that square is school, or whether that square is my private time in front of the computer when no one is watching, or...you know all the different squares of your life.

There's a tendency, I think, in us to forget that if God were to withdraw his sustaining grace from me that I would crumble on the spot. That no matter how strong I am, no matter how smart you are, no matter how clever we are, we cannot make it. And that we desperately need the ongoing power of God's sustaining grace. I suspect that the missionaries understand this better than any of us, as they live on the edge, as they live on the fringe.

We were reminded this morning at prayer time (some of us gather at 8:30 to pray) and a lady came in and I was explaining what I was going to preach on and I looked at her face throughout the explanation and I said, "What's up?" She said, "The police brought my son home last night drunk out of his mind and we don't know what to do." They need God's sustaining grace.

I'm remembering another young person who had a near fatal accident, again connected to liquor, (is there a connection here?) but God in his sustaining grace put his seatbelt on and kept him from being killed. See, these people understand that even in all the other squares of our life, that we must have God's sustaining grace. It's why Paul ends so many of his letters, "Grace be with you." He's not saying goodbye, he's saying, "You need it. You need God's grace and may it be with you." It's why John Piper can write a book called, "Future Grace." It was a strange title when I first saw it, but the book is about John saying that he is so thankful for God's saving grace in the past. I am thankful that God has sustained me in the past. But you know what? That's not really my concern. What I'm concerned about is the grace that will sustain me the next minute and the next hour and the years until the end of my life. It's the grace I need in the future to get me to heaven that I'm concerned about, future grace, sustaining grace.

## **II. One way God's grace shows itself is in my financial giving.**

Why all this talk about grace? It's because one way in which God's grace shows itself is in our financial giving. Yes, this is one of those sermons.

## **A. Primary NT passage on giving is 2 Corinthians 8-9.**

The primary New Testament passage on giving is 2 Corinthians 8-9. Paul is at the end of his third missionary journey. He's been collecting an offering from the Gentile church for a long time. He wants to take it back and get it to the Jewish church in Jerusalem to help them in their need. And what he's doing in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is encouraging the Corinthian church to give. He's encouraging them by reflecting on what the Macedonian church has already given.

### **1. Dominant note is that of "grace" – "Grace of Giving"**

The dominant note that goes all the way through these two chapters is the note of grace. I want you to hear that. The dominant note in 2 Corinthians 8-9 is not, "I want your money." The dominant note is God's grace and hence the title of this sermon, "The Grace of Giving." If you hear anything this morning (I'm going to give it to you up front in case some of your red flags start waving. I'm going to give you the message up front.) Paul is going to teach us that giving is God's gift of grace to undeserving sinners that frees us from the materialism of this world by calling us to give; to give generously and to give cheerfully. Giving is a gift of God's grace.

### **2. Alcorn: how we often apologetically approach topic of wealth, possessions & giving**

When we were back at the pastor's conference several weeks ago, Randy Alcorn spoke; and in fact, much of what he had to say about money is in his book, "The Treasure Principle," and I encourage you to get it and to read it. It's full of really good one-liners like, "You've never seen a U-Haul behind a hearse." Little pictures that stick. In his address he started talking about how apologetic we often are when we talk about wealth and possessions and giving. In tongue and cheek, Randy Alcorn started this way; "I need to apologize this morning that I need to talk to you about adultery. After all, this is adultery week and the adultery committee requires me to preach on adultery once a year. Now for those who are caught in adultery I'm really sorry, just bear with me and I promise I won't talk about it again until next year's adultery week." He was saying this to a thousand pastors who probably at one time or another have all preached on stewardship exactly the same way, apologetically. "Well this is stewardship week and the stewardship committee is making me preach on it and so if this is a struggle with you, I'm sorry but I just need to do it." And that's often how we do it, isn't it?

You know we can snicker about that, but the fact of the matter is that 15% of the New Testament is about money and possessions. I don't know if it talks about anything else more than money and possessions. On a series on the 52 major events of the Bible it would be negligent, nay, sinful to omit discussion of 15% of the New Testament. After all, it's your fault. You are the ones that have asked me to preach the full gospel. So here it comes without apology.

## **C. Sets The Stage**

2 Corinthians 8:1, Paul sets the stage, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." Paul says, "I want you to know about the grace of God in Macedonia. I want you to know about the gift of God's grace that has saved unworthy sinners; but I also want you to know the gift of

God's grace that has enabled the Macedonians to give." When he's talking about grace here, he's talking about their giving, and in fact, in Greek the words "gift" and "grace" are the same basic words. They would have picked up the connection; that giving is God's gift of grace to undeserving sinners that frees us from materialism of this world by calling us to give and to give generously and to give cheerfully.

Verse 2-4, "...for in a severe test of affliction, their [Macedonian Christians] 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 free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints, [the offering for the Jewish church on the other side of the Mediterranean Ocean]."

### **1. Macedonian Christians were being severely tested — whether truly saved**

The Macedonian Christians were being severely tested and the test is simply whether they were truly saved or not. They were tested with their afflictions. They were experiencing severe persecution for their Christianity. You can read about it in the letters to the other Macedonian churches, like Philippi; and you can read about it in Acts. They were experiencing what Paul says is true for all of us, that anyone who seeks to live a godly life will be persecuted, 2 Timothy 3:12. And so their afflictions and how they were going to respond to the persecution is a test of their faith.

But they were also being tested by their "extreme" poverty. We know historically that the Macedonian Christians lived at a poverty rate far below our definition of poverty. You do understand, don't you, that everyone of us in this room lives in the top ten percent of the wealthiest people in the history of the world? It's all statistically laid out for you in different books. I think that we would have to visit second and third world countries if we really wanted to understand the extent of the Macedonian poverty. Their poverty was extreme, such that it was a test of their faith.

### **2. Passed the test – Proved by their actions that their faith was real**

Paul continues that the Macedonian Christians passed the test. They proved by their actions that their faith was real. They proved that God's sustaining and saving grace was present in their midst. They proved it by two things. The number one thing that proved the presence of God's saving and sustaining grace was the abundance of their joy. This is no health and wealth garbage (theological term). This is joy in the midst of suffering and persecution and poverty like probably none of us or almost none of us have ever seen. But they passed the test.

They proved that their faith was true also because their giving "overflowed in a wealth of generosity." You see, the Macedonians' abundant joy, a joy that flowed into their generous giving, can only be explained by seeing it as a result of God's saving and sustaining grace in their lives. The abundance of the missionaries' joy, a joy that flows into making decisions that are silly according to the standards of this world, can only be explained because they have received the saving and the sustaining grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the only thing that can explain that kind of decision. Nothing else. The Macedonians passed the test. They proved their salvation true by their joy and by their giving.

### **3. Should be no surprise that Paul tells the Corinthians – and us**

When you read on then, it should come as no surprise that Paul tells the Corinthians and through them to you and to me, that we too must “prove” the genuineness of our faith. Look half way through verse 7 into verse 8. Paul says, “See that you [Corinthians] [See that you Spokanites] excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove [I want you to prove, is the idea] by the earnestness of others [your giving to others] that your love [that’s your faith in Jesus Christ] also is genuine.” Prove it! The same thought comes in verse 24, “So give proof before the churches of your love...” Now I can assume that in the hearts, at least of some of us, there’s a reaction. And the reaction is, “I don’t gotta prove nothing to nobody.” Right? “This is my business. My giving is private.” And that is the reaction of a sinful, individualistic, western, non-gracious culture. That’s where that’s coming from.

The Bible says that we are to prove God’s grace through our generous and our joyful giving; show that God’s grace, is in fact, active in our life. Our giving is proof of God’s saving and our giving is proof of God’s sustaining grace; the only thing that can free us from this materialistic world.

To make matters even stronger, Paul is just giving us specific application to a very important general principle on the lips of Jesus in John 15:8. Jesus says to his disciples, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” That’s what Jesus says. The specific fruit that Paul is looking for from the Corinthian church and from you and me is the fruit of giving.

## **III. How were they able to give so generously? 8:5**

How were they able to give so generously? How could people who were under such oppression, such persecution, who were under such extreme poverty, able to give so generously? My mind goes back to the gentleman who came here a while back from Ethiopia and showed the video of his home church and here was the room much smaller than this room with hundreds of Ethiopians standing and jumping for joy. We could fit about three thousand of them in this new building. What explains this kind of joy?

### **A. Macedonian Christians, first and foremost, gave themselves to God**

How were they able to give themselves and their money so generously? Paul tells us in verse 5, “...and this, not as we expected, but they [Macedonians] gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” The Macedonian Christians first and foremost gave themselves to God. They understood God’s saving grace. They understood that as undeserving sinners they had been given the gift of life, not because they deserved it but because God is a God of grace. The Macedonian Christians then understood God’s sustaining grace. It had, in fact, transformed them. It had, in fact, enabled them to break the bonds of materialism and had in fact enabled them to give.

### **B. This is why giving is an “act of grace” (v 1)**

This is why giving is an act of grace. This has been my theological struggle all week as I tried to figure out how can Paul go from verse 1, “the grace of God,” to the fact of our giving. This idea of giving being a grace of God is repeated in verse 7 where he says that we should excel in this act of grace. It comes again in verse 19. It says, “We carry out this act of grace [the offering for the Jewish church] that is being ministered by us,

for the glory of the Lord himself..." How do you get from the idea of God's grace to our giving?

When you step back and you think about it, it gets clear. God's grace enables us to want to give; and then as he actually goes on, God's grace enables us to be able to give. His grace saves us. His grace sustains us. His grace changes us. His grace changes our affections. His grace changes even our ability to give because it is God who enables you and me to make our wealth.

Look at Chapter 9:8, 10. "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, [it is God's grace that makes us be sufficient. That's our money or more properly, it's his money] that you may abound in every good work." That is the grace of giving. Verse 10: "That he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness." God is a God of grace and he gives us the seed to plant; he, in fact, multiplies the seed so we have a lot of seeds to plant; and we have, in this church, do we not, a phenomenal amount of seed that we can plant. Then also, God gives growth to the seed so that there is a harvest of bread.

The Macedonians understand that God is a giver, is the Giver, and that he gives at both ends. He gives in the planting and he gives in the harvesting. All of this is an act of grace on his part because he could allow us to stay under the clutches of materialism and being in love with this world and die in failure, but God in his grace wanted us to be free from this world and free from the clutches of materialism. So he enables us, day by day, in every square of this patchwork quilt of our existence. He enables us to want to do what he wants us to do and then he gives us the means to do it. So he gives us desires, by his grace, to give and then he gives us the money, the wealth. The untold wealth possessed by the evangelical American church is beyond comprehension. The statistics that I've seen say that no one in this world ever need be hungry again if the American evangelical church would get off its wallet and give.

### **C. They also understood that giving is God's will (v 5)**

The Macedonians understood that. They understood that God is the giver, the enabler, but they also understood that giving is God's will. You want to know what God's will for your life is? Give. Verse 5, "...gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us;" Paul's apostolic ministry and in this particular case, the offering. The same idea pops up in chapter 9:13. Paul repeats himself a lot and I would encourage you to read chapters 8 and 9 because you'll see the same themes coming up over and over again. In 9:13 Paul says, "By their [Jewish church that's going to receive the offering] approval of this service, [your ministry of giving] they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ." It's crucial to see the flow of theology. Let me reverse it in this verse: the Corinthians have experienced God's saving grace; they've made the confession of the gospel of Christ. The Corinthians have submitted themselves to God's sustaining grace that calls and enables them to give, that's the submission, and the result of all of this is God being glorified, which, of course is the primary goal for all believers, right? Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do for the primary purpose of glorifying, of bringing praise and honor, to our Lord Jesus Christ and his Father God.

## **D. Macedonians understood that everything belongs to God – 1 Cor. 6:19-20**

The Macedonians understood that everything belongs to God, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

Even our bodies belong to him. We were bought with a price, the precious blood of the Lamb, and our bodies are not our own. We are stewards of God's wealth and we are to use God's wealth for his purposes. We are stewards of God's wealth and we are to use his wealth for his purposes. That's how we treasure up treasures in heaven.

Now, one purpose of God is that we use his wealth to care for ourselves and care for our family. One of the very interesting things is that God allows us to set our own salary, doesn't he? He allows us to look at the wealth, his wealth that he has given to us, and he says, "Take some of it. I want you to take some of my money. I want you to use some of my wealth to care for your spouse and your children and your mortgage and your car. I want you to do that. That's okay." But another purpose that we as stewards have, is to give God's wealth away to further God's purposes.

Randy Alcorn states one of his principles is that we are not given God's wealth to raise our standard of living. But we are given wealth to raise our standard of giving. That's why you and I have so much money, an unbelievable amount of wealth.

## **IV. What is our ultimate motivation and goal?**

What's the ultimate motivation; what's the ultimate goal of all this? This is where Paul is moving. Our motivation is that we want to respond in kind to what Jesus has done for us. 2 Corinthians 8:9, "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 by his poverty might become rich." Paul uses the incarnation to teach us about giving; that just as Christ gave graciously, freely, cheerfully, voluntarily, generously, so also you and I are to give, in like, to others. The ultimate goal, that's simple, what's the ultimate goal of all of life? To bring glory to God by what we say and do and by what we don't say and don't do.

That's how we glorify our Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Even in things such as eating and drinking, 1 Corinthians 10:31; but specifically in our handling of God's wealth we are to glorify God. Chapter 8:19, "... as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us for the glory of the Lord." Chapter 9:13, "...they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ."

Randy Alcorn has a good paragraph about this whole issue of bringing glory to God in our giving. Page 57: "The act of giving is a vivid reminder that it's all about God not about us. It's saying, 'I am not the point. He is the point. He does not exist for me. I exist for him.' God's money has a higher purpose than my affluence. Giving is a joyful surrender to a greater person and a greater agenda. Giving affirms Christ's lordship. It dethrones me and exalts him. It breaks the chains of mammon that would enslave me." Treasure principle T #5 is simply: "Giving is the only antidote to materialism." There's no other way to break it. Our ultimate motivation is to respond in kind to what Jesus has done in his grace for undeserving sinners and is doing. Our ultimate goal in everything we do, including how we handle God's wealth, is to bring praise and honor and glory to him.

### **Struggled with this final point**

I've struggled with this last point that I want to make. I've talked to a lot of people this week and have annoyed quite a few of you. That's okay. It's my job and you pay me to

do this, because you have asked me to preach the whole gospel, haven't you? The whole gospel, not the part gospel, the whole gospel. And you asked me to do it bluntly and honestly, gently and biblically. I've got to tell you, it's what I'm going to do because when I left the pastor's conference, the conviction when I left is: that I have not been preaching the whole gospel. I have been scared spitless about preaching to you about God's money that's in your back pocket. That's going to stop right now.

### **A. I don't care about your money**

But let me tell you, I don't give a rip about your money. I mean I really, really don't. It makes no difference to me in one sense. God is going to be faithful. God is going to fulfill his promises and his purposes with or without you. In one sense it's only a question of whether you're going to be blessed or not. Because if you don't want to be blessed, then put God's money away. 1 Corinthians 9:6, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." I really don't care, frankly.

### **B. I do care about your heart**

But I do care about your heart. It's my calling to care about your heart. That's why the elders and I are called "shepherds." We're supposed to care for you. Jesus says the location of your treasure is the indicator of the location of your heart, Matthew 6. Paul says that a person who has truly experienced God's grace towards undeserving sinners will give. That's what the Bible says, right? When we are being obedient to Scripture, we can see the grace of God at work in our lives. I have to ask, "Is God's grace at work in your life or not?" Why are the Muslims building schools in Kyrgyzstan and the Christians aren't?

What I want is this: I want for all of us to be able to conclude the way Paul concludes in chapter 9:15, "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift [of grace]" The gift of grace that saves undeserving sinners like me. The gift of grace that leads and enables us to give, give to the advancement of God's kingdom and for the sake of God's glory alone. To show God and one another in the world that God's grace is alive and well and kicking in the body of Christ.

Giving is God's gift of grace to undeserving sinners that frees us from the materialism of this world by calling us to give generously and cheerfully.