

# Grace Giving

## *An Analysis of 2 Corinthians 8-9*

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### Introductory Issues

#### *The Grace Giving Model—Normative?*

Much of these two chapters is historical and personal, not doctrinal. We should not assume *a priori* that every aspect of the Corinthian-Macedonian giving model is directly applicable to twenty-first century American Christians. In fact, Paul gave some indication of this when he stated, “*I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love*” (8:8). He later referred to his statements on the matter of giving as “*advice*” (*gnome*: judgment, opinion, resolve, advice, decree) (8:10).

This fact notwithstanding, 2 Corinthians 8-9 form the most significant body of New Testament teaching on the subject of Christian giving. There are certainly normative principles embedded within the historical and personal material.

#### *Grace Giving vs. Faith Promise*

Advocates of “faith promise” missionary giving point to these chapters as the biblical basis for the system. Some go so far as to say that “faith promise” is *the* biblical system, not a human device that conforms (or can conform) to biblical principle. In my judgment, the latter position can lead to the exaltation of human tradition above divine command—all in the name of adherence to Scripture.

It is significant to note that faith does not play a prominent part in passage under examination. The word itself occurs only once, and there by way of contrast with giving (8:7).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the language of the text suggests that the overarching principle of giving taught here is *grace*. The Greek word *charis* (often translated “grace” but containing other shades of meaning, such as favor, thanks, and gift) occurs ten times in the space of two chapters. In the King James Version, it is translated “grace” seven times (8:1; 8:6; 8:7; 8:9; 8:19; 9:8; 9:14).

#### *The Purpose of Grace Giving*

The collection referred to in 2 Corinthians 8-9 was designed to meet the material needs of the poor Christians in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Within the passage Paul referred to it as “the ministering to the saints” (8:4; 9:1). A companion text in Paul’s earlier canonical letter to Corinth makes it clear that the offering was going to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1), a matter which is confirmed by other Pauline references (Rom. 15:25-26; cf. Acts 11:27-30; Gal. 2:10). It was, in a nutshell, an effort to relieve the physical needs of Christians under stress. The collection was missionary in the sense that it addressed needs outside the context of the givers’ local congregation, but it was not primarily evangelistic.

### Grace Giving: The Macedonians’ Example (8:1-5)

Paul begins his discussion of grace giving by narrating the experience of the Macedonian churches (v. 1). Macedonia was a Roman province that contained such cities as Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (cf. Acts 16:5-17:14). It was situated north of Achaia (where Corinth was). The Macedonians were, therefore, the Corinthians’ not-too-distant neighbors. Severely impoverished, they begged

Paul to accept a generous contribution towards the Jerusalem collection (vv. 2-4). Their generosity stemmed from spiritual commitment: They gave themselves to the Lord, then to Paul and his companions, and subsequently to Paul's vision for delivering an offering to Jerusalem.

### **Grace Giving: An Exhortation to Participate (8:6-15)**

Having described the Macedonians' sacrificial giving, Paul proceeded to encourage the Corinthians to contribute to the project as well. The Corinthians were otherwise spiritually mature (v. 7). Paul challenged them with the Macedonian example and with their own experience of Christ's grace (vv. 8-9). In addition, he reminded them of their earlier enthusiasm about giving: They had indicated their willingness to contribute a year before (vv. 10-12).

Paul explained that the key issue was "a willing mind"; his readers were accountable for the resources they had rather than those they didn't have (8:12). Thus he affirmed the matter of proportionate giving (cf. 1 Cor. 16:2). Furthermore, his plan was not about depleting their resources, but about producing equality among Christians on a broad scale. The Corinthians' present abundance would supply the Judeans' need; if circumstances were reversed in the future, the Corinthians would become beneficiaries. Paul correlated this principle with the Israelites' collection of manna in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 16:18).

### **Grace Giving: The Role of Spiritual Leaders (8:16-9:5)**

Paul had asked Titus to oversee the completion of the Corinthian gift (8:6). However, Titus took the initiative to do so, being burdened by God for this purpose (8:16-17). There were two unnamed brothers who were designated by the churches (probably those of Macedonia) to aid in the administration of the gift (8:18, 22; 9:3). Paul referred to Titus as his "partner and fellowhelper concerning you," and to the brothers as "the messengers of the churches" (8:23).

Why were so many people involved in the offering? The leaders played two roles in relation to the collection—promotion and administration. Paul, Titus, and the unnamed brothers were involved in motivating the Corinthians to give (9:1-5). Such giving did not take place overnight. A year had passed, and the collection was not yet complete. Promoting giving is a time-intensive process.

The spiritual leaders were also concerned with maintaining the integrity of the giving process. Paul had already stated to the Corinthians that they would be able to select representatives to deliver their offering to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:3-4). Now he was taking measures to ensure that no one could accuse the leaders of handling the gift unethically (8:20-21). Church finances are a delicate matter. Wherever money is given to God, it should be administered with great care.

### **Grace Giving: Material and Spiritual Outcomes (9:6-15)**

How, then, were the Corinthians to give, and what could they expect to happen when they did? Paul answered these questions in the final section of his offering discussion. It is here, more than elsewhere, that enduring principles of giving appear. As to how the gift was to be given, Paul spoke of three principles:

- Harvest: The Corinthians were to give recognizing that they would be blessed to the extent that they gave. As in a harvest, they would reap in proportion to their sowing (9:6; cf. Luke 6:38; Gal. 6:7-9).

- Voluntary purpose: The gift was to be voluntary, not compulsory. God would gain no glory from coerced giving (9:7). In urging the Corinthians to give, Paul was merely pushing them to do what they had already expressed an interest in doing (8:10ff; 9:2).
- Divine enablement: The essence of grace giving is that it is not something that believers can do on their own. The Macedonians had demonstrated generosity under dire circumstances—something totally unnatural. Their giving spirit was truly a work of divine grace. Paul made clear that God’s power was sufficient to enable the Corinthians to give—*all* grace abounding, *always*, leading to *all* sufficiency in *all* things, abounding to *every* good work (9:8). He emphasized this point by quoting from Psalm 112:9.

The Corinthians’ generosity would yield several outcomes:

- Spiritual fruit: By giving back the resources God had supplied, they would sow good seed and reap “fruits of . . . righteousness” (9:10).
- Supply of material needs: Quite obviously, the Corinthians’ gift would meet legitimate physical needs (9:12).
- Thanksgiving: Their generosity would also produce thanksgiving on the part of the Judean believers. Not only would they rejoice in receiving a liberal gift, they would glorify God for the Gentiles’ sincere obedience to the gospel (9:12-13).
- Prayer: As a result of the above, the Judean Christians would be drawn into spiritual intimacy with the Gentile givers, and would pray for them longingly (9:14).

Paul concluded his discussion of grace giving with a doxology, thanking “God for his unspeakable gift” (9:15). This is most likely a reference to God’s gift of salvation in the person of Christ (cf. 8:9).

## Conclusion

The story of Paul’s Jerusalem collection has much to say regarding support for Christian causes through the local church. God desires to supply the material needs of His work through the generosity of His people. The genius of grace giving is that we learn to become channels through which God delivers blessings to those in need. Through this process, we give beyond our ability—in a way that is unmistakably a work of grace.

What can be said of the “faith promise” movement? The terminology itself is not found in Scripture; while not inherently anti-biblical, it probably should be abandoned in favor of biblical phraseology (i.e., grace giving). It is more difficult to evaluate the idea of “faith promise,” principally because it is practiced in many different ways in different churches. The “faith promise” approach does admit some possible abuses:

- It can be made coercive, violating the principle of voluntary giving.
- The trappings of the program can be elevated to the level of Scripture (cf. Matt. 15:3).
- Faulty hermeneutics can be employed to justify its status as the biblical method of missions giving.
- It can be used manipulatively, leading church members to commit sums that are foolish and unreasonable.
- It is often presented as a supplement to the tithe, a form of giving that lacks a clear New Testament foundation.

“Faith promise” need not be practiced abusively, however. If presented as a means of giving according to biblical principle, and practiced in accord with the normative principles of 2 Corinthians 8-9, it can be God-honoring and singularly effective in rallying Christians to support spiritual causes.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, any form of Christian giving properly belongs to the realm of faith. Surrendering our possessions to God requires us to trust Him to meet our needs with less than what we would otherwise have. Nevertheless, faith plays no greater role in the kind of giving taught here than in any other form of Christian giving.

<sup>2</sup> According to Harris, “The offering was destined for the Hebrew Christians at Jerusalem, who may have referred to themselves as ‘the poor’ (*hoi ptochoi*, Rom 15:26; Gal 2:10; = Heb. *haebyonim*, cf. Ebionites)—those who were completely dependent on God’s provision (cf. Matt 5:3). Several factors account for their continuing poverty: (1) After their conversion to Christianity many Jews in Jerusalem would have been ostracized socially and economically. (2) The ‘experiment in community sharing’ described in Acts 2:44, 45 and 4:32, 34, 35 undoubtedly would have aggravated, though it did not cause, their poverty. (3) Persistent food shortages in Palestine because of overpopulation culminated in the famine of A.D. 46 in the time of Emperor Claudius (Acts 11:27-30). (4) As the mother-church of Christendom, the Jerusalem church was obliged to support a proportionately large number of teachers and probably to provide hospitality for frequent Christian visitors to the holy city. (5) Jews in Palestine were subject to a crippling twofold taxation—Jewish and Roman.”