

Philippians Postscript | The Grace of Giving

The Grace of Giving (Part One)

Rev. T.J. Campo

8.24.14

2 Corinthians 8.1-15

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.

*I am **not** speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. 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. I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. But now finish doing it also, so that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality-- at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality; as it is written, "HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK."*

This summer, our congregation got acquainted with another congregation, one from the ancient world. We looked at St. Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi – in the North of Greece, in Macedonia.

Another church with which Paul corresponded by letter was Corinth is in the South. And when Paul wrote to the church at Corinth he made an important reference to their neighbors from the North. The church at Philippi in Macedonia (in the North) is used as an example.

For us, Paul's reference is like a "P.S." to our Philippians series. It rounds out our understanding of this church we've been getting to know.

The reason Paul references the church at Philippi or Macedonia is their exemplary generosity. We hope to look at it for two weeks in a row: how the basic message of Christianity became a powerful engine for generosity and the liberated management of money: the Gospel and financial freedom.

Money is, of course, a funny thing; people would rather not talk about it in church... or anywhere else. We can get very private about our own money and feel like no one has a right to pry into what we deem to be our own business. And also, money is a major source of anxiety for almost all people.

If you have a lot you worry about holding ON to it and if you don't have a lot you worry about how to get it, how to pay your bills, how to earn, save.

And money is a kind of living thing – we speak of it as we do of blood, for instance: money and blood are in circulation and to stop the flow leads to the death of the organism.

This section, two chapters right in the middle of Second Corinthians, uses agricultural metaphors like seed and harvest (living). And I want to use that imagery to 1st – Broadly Describe what's happening and 2nd – Focus on the Core and 3rd – To Get Pointed

I want to get pointed about money... but... as I said last week, "Don't be afraid!"

Here's what's happening in agricultural terms: Paul tills the soil, plants some seeds, pulls some weeds and employs some harvesters.

When I say, "tills the soil" I mean that Paul has stirred things up in that Corinthian Church by calling them to repent. Corinth was a resort town, a kind of boomtown. Actually it was a lot like Ft. Lauderdale and Miami: it was full of tourists and people came from all over the world to strike it rich there.

And this church was into grace – they learned that, when it comes to God, we don't earn or deserve a good standing with Him; it comes as a GIFT. And they were right! And they saw that grace means NOT being judgmental with others. We see that we're all disqualified and ALL must depend on God's mercy.

But they FAILED to see that grace ALSO leads to love and that loving God and loving other people means that we want God to lead and direct and command us how to live... God's grace and presence gives us a thirst for God's character.

They missed that...and grace degenerated into mere tolerance and this very public and notorious case of sexual immorality. Under the guise of grace people just looked the other way. They called it love but really it was indifference and apathy.

And Paul had written, warning them to see that grace leads to real love and NOT simply hyper-tolerance and turning a blind eye to what offends God. Paul says, “this openly practiced immorality has to be lovingly confronted – the offending parties have to either stop this or else admit that for them Jesus Christ IS NOT LORD...and then leave the church.”

Those were hard words for Paul to say...and he wondered how his words would be received.

Then, he got word that the church was broken and deeply saddened by Paul’s words...and...they did indeed repent. They stopped acting as if their sexuality was THEIR own to do with as they pleased. They saw themselves as having been bought with a price, that they belonged body and soul to the One who had ransomed them! They saw that their practice had NOT been grace and love – it had been neglect and careless indifference.

And directly before today’s passage, Paul was expressing his relief at the way this church responded to his last letter and they DID indeed repent and respond to Jesus Christ as LORD... His grace not only pardons us, it also transforms us! Big relief for Paul.

And then, after “going there” as we might say, after discussing this delicate issue and relieved at their response and repentance – after tilling the soil, Paul plants a seed. The seed is an idea, actually an example he wants the Corinthian Church to consider following.

The opening words in today’s reading, “Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia.”

Paul gives us a behind the scenes look at the church we’ve been reading about this summer. This Philippian Church was not living in a boomtown and they were a poor congregation and one facing some degree of persecution. But out of their poverty they became great givers.

Here’s how Paul put it, “in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality...I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us and pleading for the favor of participation in the support of the saints” (vv. 2-4)

This congregation, if they had a \$100, somehow gave us \$110...beyond what they HAD! Beyond their ability! And it wasn’t due to any pressure we applied but because they rested in God – gave themselves to God – THEN they believed that HE wanted them to give to us. They sent money for us to bring to the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem who are suffering...and in big need! They begged us to let them help!

So... I just want to plant this seed...give you an idea... spark a brainstorm in YOU... maybe you’d consider their example...and...you know...maybe...follow it.

Because YOU seem to get it...you seem to have it goin' on...seem to get this good news that the Philippians got...you abound in faith (i.e. you receive the same grace that they get) and in utterance (you can speak it, articulate it, teach it) and in all earnestness and love... So maybe this grace would produce the same fruit of radical generosity in YOU...

And then Paul 1) tills the soil... 2) plants this idea/example and...then 3) he seems aware that they COULD get the wrong idea...doesn't want any weeds to mess it up. So he pulls the weeds – he plucks up the wrong ideas.

v. 8 “I am NOT speaking this as a command but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also.”

“Look”, says Paul, “I am genuinely interested in what God is doing IN you and I don't want to make this about ME, the great Paul, your cultic guru, your spiritual supervisor! It's NOT about me...”

I sincerely want to see the power of God's grace in your lives. I'm giving you a seed, an example. But I am NOT saying, “And YOU Christians at Corinth YOU BETTER DO THE SAME THING or else!” That's not how this grace thing works!

It's a seed...an idea...IT'S NOT a kind of wooden law or dead rule or commandment. I'm just saying, you started a collection for the famine victims in Jerusalem... you not only STARTED it but actually GOT it going...YOU DESIRED it...it was YOUR idea... it was not by peer pressure or fear or because you were sucking up to me or trying to score points... It was your passion and desire...

But now finish the work... not because of me or even because of the Macedonians but because God gave you this desire. YOU NEED this for your own spiritual health and God gave you an opportunity to exercise love...He gave you the desire to GIVE... and you will be better givers if you ACTUALLY DO IT... so finish it.

You need this opportunity to LOVE and they need the gift... Another time THEY will need the opportunity to LOVE and YOU will need the GIFT. So do what is so good to do...what YOU REALLY want to do...finish the task.

And then, in the section that follows, which we didn't print, Paul 1) tills the soil (an environment or repentance) 2) plants the seed (this example/idea) 3) pulls the weeds (the potential misunderstandings) and 4) employs some harvesters.

In vv. 15ff Paul mentions the cross-cultural workers or deacons of the churches that would actually carry this offering TO the Christians in Jerusalem who were in desperate need of money so they could eat.

And as the Corinthians are receiving this letter and reading it – these relief or mercy workers are standing there... hoping that Paul's seed, this idea and encouragement for the Corinthians to finish the collection will be well received and that THEY will be given some money to help the folks in Jerusalem.

So, that's it. The BROAD picture of what's happening here. These churches are cooperating in mission and they are cross-pollinating one another. Paul is like the honey bee who's helping the process.

But here's a closer (briefer) look at the CORE of the chapter and the CORE of Paul's Method/Message. When he speaks of this exemplary church, he's quite clear on how they GOT that way: "we wish to make known the grace of God given in the churches in Macedonia".

Giving is a grace. Generosity is a gift from God. We NEED to give. We need opportunities to exercise love. Mrs. Iverson said, "the poor don't need the Presbyterians – the Presbyterians NEED the poor!"

And when the joy of the Gospel meets the opportunity to give and it works together in God's strange math somehow it leads to growth and love.

Being a Christian is first about receiving grace. We repent of our sin and openly recognize the need for God's mercy and forgiveness. We see ourselves as needy and sinful and incomplete and spiritually/morally bankrupt. And then we get grace, by believing the Good News that Jesus Christ lived the life we failed to live and died the death we deserved to die. We experience this overwhelming sense of need and this overwhelming sense of relief! We taste and see that the Lord is Good.

And while we enter IN only once, as we're born only once, but then we come again and again to be nourished on the grace that made us alive.

It was grace that made the Macedonians generous. The word is used over ten times in this little section. And it's IN the environment of repentance and faith where generosity grows. It's repentant faith that receives grace and grace leads to love and giving.

It's no coincidence that Paul tilled the soil. It's not an accident that the discussion on generosity came after the one on repentance. People who are growing in grace are also growing in love, becoming freer in their giving. When Paul thinks of this Corinthian Church

(which had some real problems btw) but when he sees their repentance – that their hearts are not arrogant and stubborn but that they come to Jesus Christ ...and they have problems...and they come to Jesus Christ...and they sin ...and they come to Jesus Christ repenting and believing...and they have their ISSUES...and they come sorrowful, repenting and believing and receiving new grace...

It's IN that environment of the tilled soil, not fallow ground that Paul has confidence in their growth and progress as givers...Repentance...leads to growth and joy...and love and generosity and freedom. And Paul gives them an idea, an example, a seed NOT a heavy handed thunder-bolt from Sinai. That's not what Paul gives and NOT what they need. They're repenting and the stage is set for NEW grace.

That said, it's not MUSH. Even people who are under grace can lose their way and need a reminder, "Hey! I'm glad you started to collect money for famine relief and EVEN gladder that it was your heart's desire under the influence of grace ...but ...ah hem... uh...now...uh...get it done – YOU need to love and THEY need to eat.

Now for the final point – and like a cone, we've now come to the point. Paul is ALWAYS very concerned about motivation. The Gospel is an ENGINE for changed motives leading to changed behavior and right at the center of this passage is this TURBINE, this generator "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."

This is ALWAYS, for Paul the hub of the wheel. If you could see with "unbeclouded eyes" (Isaac Watts) the riches that are yours as a believer in Jesus Christ.

If you could get a moment of crystal clarity that the God who made the galaxies and governs the molecules, the infinite, eternal and unchangeable Spirit humbled Himself for rebels and squanderers HE became poor so that WE could go HOME...could know Him as Father...

If you could see how rich that makes you as a believer...it would make you free of worry and generous...and if YOU are not yet a Christian, if you could see this, you would repent and believe immediately.

"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."

That's the point.