

THE GRACE OF GIVING (The meaning of Offering)

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Key Verse : 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 through his poverty might become rich.”

Introduction: Good morning everyone. Did you have a good week? We had a good Easter Sunday service last week. I also had lunch after the service with my family and took a walk with Agnes and my granddaughter Evelyn. I also took a picture with my grandson Jonny, the best picture I’ve taken so far this year.

P. Ron discussed with elders in the beginning of the year about having an offering message sometime. It is good to know why we offer on Sundays. He asked me to serve this message. So here I am. Briefly about me: I am married. Most of you know who my wife is. Theresa and I have six grown children. We also have 2 grandchildren. Some of you know who they are. Campus wise, I pray for UIC and MVCC. Professionally I am a physician and work at UIC in the department of Family Medicine. Dr. Maria Albright is one of my physician colleagues. She helped me to have Friday morning off to prepare this message by taking my patient load for a few hours.

I attended a joint UBF event for the first time in 1977, in Bulkwangdong Christian Retreat center in Seoul, Korea. The occasion was a joint Easter conference in the spring exactly around this time of the year. I was a sheep, or a Bible student. I did not really know Jesus then. When an offering basket was passed around, I only dropped a coin in, out of disapproval. Now I am ashamed to say this. But that was my true feeling then. I did not really know either the meaning of offering or the grace of Jesus. Now I am a little different. Theresa and I are longtime members of UBF and we have certain way of offering to God.

But let us learn today what Paul has to say about offering.

Paul was planning to visit Jerusalem with offerings from Gentile churches to serve the poor Jerusalem Christians as a part of a unity and reconciliation effort of the church. 2 Corinthians is Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. I like his letters to the Corinthians because I can see Paul up close: brutally honest, passionately loving and deeply concerned about the affairs of

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the church. Paul and the Corinthian church had a turbulent and conflict-ridden relationship. Paul rebuked them severely and openly as you can read in 1 Corinthians. Did they rebel against Paul and decide to create another church? No. If that were the case, we would not have this letter. Paul heard through Titus, who was sent to Corinth, that they truly repented and earnestly wanted to see Paul. Paul wrote this second letter to the Corinthian church, a letter of reconciliation and encouragement. Using this opportunity, Paul reminded the church of their pledge to gather a collection for the church in Jerusalem. Paul regarded the Gentile churches and the Jerusalem church as one and encouraged the Gentile churches to offer to provide relief for the poverty stricken Jerusalem Christians.

Part 1: The example of the giving of the Macedonian churches

First, their trial welled up into rich generosity.

Look at verses 1-2. **“And now, brothers and sisters, we want to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”** The churches in Macedonia were namely the churches of Thessalonica, Berea, and Philippi that Paul also pioneered earlier. Paul described that the offerings of the Macedonian churches were generous offerings. Were they generous because they were rich? Most of us think that we can be generous when we become rich. That is partially true. Many rich people are generous. But the fact was that Macedonian churches were not rich. They were in the midst of a very severe trial. Maybe they suddenly found themselves strangers in their own land because of their faith. They were extremely poor. But they ended up giving generously? Why? Look at verse one again, **“And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.”** Paul could not explain the reason for their overflowing joy and rich generosity very well. He just said that it was because of God’s grace upon them.

We all know the grace of Jesus as Christians. By God’s grace, when we believed that Jesus died for us and rose again, we received the gift of new life. When we believed in the name of Jesus Christ, we were freed from the bondage that has bound us for many years. We have new life and boundless joy and deep peace because of the grace of Jesus. With this grace, we work hard, harder than ever. We love more than ever. We serve more than ever. That was the secret of

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the Macedonians. They were poor. But their joy was overflowing in the midst of trials and hardships. So their trial ended in rich generosity by his grace.

Look at verse 3a. **“For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.”** I do not know how they were able to give beyond their ability. One possibility is that when they pledged beyond their ability, suddenly their income was unexpectedly increased or suddenly they received a larger than expected income tax return from the government. Or perhaps they sold some of their valuables to be able to give more.

Second, they gave voluntarily, or they took it a privilege to give.

Look at verses 3b and 4. **“Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.”** Have you ever urgently pleaded with any church or any other people for the privilege of sharing in the service of others? The Macedonian Christians took it as a privilege to share in the service to the saints. Imagine that your brothers and sisters are planning to collect some money to prepare a small gift for your mother for her 60th birthday. Would you not feel offended if they did not contact you to participate in that graceful occasion? I would be very offended if that happened to me, because I love my mother. The same was true with the Macedonian churches. They pleaded urgently with the church to participate in serving the needy brothers in Jerusalem. They took it as a privilege to be a part of sharing in this grace. They wanted to be a part of this grace of giving.

Third, they gave themselves first.

Look at verse 5. **“And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.”** Here we learn that offering is basically giving ourselves first to the Lord. It is appropriate that we offer (money) during our worship service as a part of our worship. Worship is the offering of ourselves to God. That worship should not be happening only on Sundays either. As Christians we live a life of worship every day and every hour. Our life itself is our worship to God. The same is true with our prayers. On Sundays we worship together (we call this corporal worship) as a culmination of our daily worship. Even though we give to the UBF church or through UBF church, whatever we give, we give it to the Lord first. We also pray that God may use this offering most precious through the prayers of elders and pastors. We also sometimes ask how the offerings were spent. However, without giving ourselves first to the Lord, we cannot truly give.

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Let us give ourselves first to the Lord as a sacrificial offering and with offering in the basket as an evidence of joyful and grateful hearts for his grace.

Actually we cannot give ourselves to God first in anything because all we have is from God. Everything is from God and all the possessions we have belong to him. We need to be aware of this. Then we can give ourselves freely first to the Lord out of thanksgiving and overflowing joy. Do you not know that nothing belongs to us and everything belongs to God? Our life, our spouse, our children, our grandchildren, our job, our Bible students (especially our Bible students), our house, our church, the United States of America, the globe and the Universe? It is a privilege that we have been able to offer God what he entrusted to us in our life time, including possessions and money that we have.

So far, Paul spoke about the exemplary giving of the Macedonian churches. They were generous by God's grace. They were giving voluntarily. They took it as a privilege to serve the needy. They also gave themselves first to the Lord, not only their possessions but everything they had

Let us read verses 6-8. **“So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything—in faith in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.”** It sounds like a motivational speech on Paul's part to the Corinthian brothers and sisters. The basis of his encouragement is that this giving is the grace giving. We also learn here that the grace of God expresses itself in us in many different ways. By God's grace, we have faith, by God's grace we speak well, by God's grace we have knowledge, by God's grace we have complete earnestness in everything we do. By God's grace we love one another. By God's grace, we give.

Since the basis of Christian giving is the grace that we received from our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul gives the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Part 2: The example of giving of our Lord Jesus Christ

Look at verse 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 through his poverty might become rich.”** Jesus is the Son of God. His dwelling place was a mansion in heaven with pearly gates and gold-paved, tree-

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lined streets. But he came down to earth as a man and experienced the life of an ordinary man. He loved many and was loved by many. But in a sense he was homeless. In Matthew 8:20 Jesus said to someone who wanted to follow him, **“Foxes have dens and the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”** Do you have a place to lay your head tonight? Jesus did not have a place of rest many times. He was an itinerant preacher. He was not always poor on earth. But in general he did not have much even though he is the Son of God. He did not have items of luxury or go on luxurious vacations during his life on earth. He left the comfort and abundance of his kingdom and suffered together with men and women of the streets during his public life on earth. Jesus died on the cross naked, without any clothing, without any possessions. He died for us. Jesus is the Lord and King who came down to earth to give us a chance to come to him and share his kingdom when we come to him. So Jesus made a choice to become poor to make us rich. This wealth you cannot find in the world. What can we give to Jesus? What can we offer to Jesus? Nothing. We only need to remember the example of our Lord Jesus who became poor to make us rich and be thankful.

We are living in the U.S., one of the richest countries of the world. It does not mean we are all rich. I am a physician by profession and but until recently I did not have a car of my own. Having six kids we had to share our cars. Now I have my own, and my wife has her own. We finally feel that we have some breathing space and are not poor. We just feel that way.

When I was an intern at Ravenswood hospital in 1988 by God’s grace alone, I used to talk with a fellow intern about this and that including our family life. He was from India and newly married. He also knew that I came from Korea and that I was married with five children at the time. He asked me several times how I could live with my intern salary. It was hard for me to explain exactly since I was living by faith in God. When he asked me more than a few times about this, I finally told him, “You know, my father is very rich.” I meant my heavenly father, but his understanding might have been different. My fellow intern stopped asking me the same question after that. And honestly, I do not know or remember how we lived. It was by God’s grace and the love of our church. We first generation missionaries did not come here for a better life. So I claim that we are not immigrants. We came here to serve American students with the word of God. Being rich or poor was our secondary concern. At the same time, we had faith in God that when we put God first by faith, God will surely bless every aspect of our lives, including our daily provisions. However, in truth, our lives were hard. But we have had overflowing joy in the midst of

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hardship that welled up into rich generosity. Many missionaries' homes were places where students enjoyed love and fellowship with their young families. The same is true with senior shepherds in Chicago ministry including Pastor Ron, who shared a house together with P Mark and all their children for several years. They struggled to love each other in Christ and were a good example to young students who were growing in our ministry. We grew together and suffered together in the midst of hardship and incredible joy serving our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are here today because of God's grace. We are here because Jesus loved us first. We are here as a part of this grace community. Even though you are here because your friend invited you, you are here today because of God's grace through your friend's prayer.

What is Paul's final word of encouragement or advice in terms of offering? Look at verses 10-12. **“And here is my judgment 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. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.”** Years ago, we even offered what we did not have. That was our mistake. Paul made it clear that we cannot give what we do not have. So it is important to have something and to be able to give. We should not come to God with empty hands.

Look at verses 13-15 **“Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time our plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: ‘The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.’”**

College and high school students have very little, but they have a future, a mom and dad, and a little money. They have something very little like allowance from parents or minimum wage from their work. They can offer a portion of that to God first out of thanksgiving, believing that everything is from God. It is the matter of faith not the matter of amount. The same is true with anyone with any income, young professionals or retired workers. It is the expression of our gratitude to God and the expression of our faith that money cannot rule us, but God is our ruler and Jesus Christ is our Lord.

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Money belongs to God as well. The worst case as Christians in terms of money is that we become very fearful and become slaves of money. What God wants of us is that we trust him, almighty God, not the almighty dollar, and seek his kingdom by faith and offer from what we have joyfully, generously and thankfully.

Here I have a suggestion based on Paul's advice to the Corinthians. He said in verse 11 "**Now finish the work.**" Obviously the Corinthians pledged to give before. Now Paul advised and encouraged them to fulfill that pledge so that their giving might match the grace they received from our Lord Jesus Christ. In 1977 I could not offer to God. No one can truly give without knowing the grace of God. But when we know His grace we can give and we should give. We have a system here at the UBF church: that is a monthly pledge of offering. You can ask about it to one of the pastors or elders or fellowship leaders. You pray first and pledge the amount of money you want to offer every month. Even students can do this. But the point is this: God wants you more than your money.

Can we make a decision today to give ourselves first to the Lord and ask him to use us in the society as salt of the earth and light of the world? Can we make a decision to devote ourselves to God for the cause of his kingdom? And also can we make a choice to make others rich through our lives of faith and sacrifice? May God richly bless you as you give yourself to the Lord.