

The Grace of Giving

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Mastering Your Money
2 Corinthians 8:1-12

Many of you know that I have been teaching about money over the last six or seven weeks and the reason that I decided to do it, as I have repeatedly said, is because of the huge amount of material on money in the Bible. I wanted to touch on some of the material that rarely gets spoken of in churches, like the use of credit cards or how God thinks about wealthy people or poor people.

This morning I want to tackle a subject that does get spoken of in churches, usually during stewardship campaign week or stewardship month, or something like that—and that is the subject of giving. I think that until I began to read widely through the Bible on the issue of money, I frankly would have approached this with apologies and with some level of embarrassment, and maybe with a number of disclaimers.

Let me make one disclaimer, and only one, because I am no longer embarrassed or feel a need to apologize in teaching you what the Bible teaches. I want to make one disclaimer and that is that I am not teaching about giving because the church is hurting financially. By God's grace, the church is not hurting financially. This is not a prelude to a major giving campaign. We will, as always, have needs and we will, as always, be telling you about them and giving you an opportunity to give. But there is no special campaign plan right now.

Part of the reason why I wanted to teach about the whole subject of money at this time was to disassociate your thoughts about money with the view point that here comes the hook. So often there is a hook. And I want you to know that there is no hook. There is no building campaign in the next six months. There is no campaign for missions. We are going to be doing a whole host of things in a year or whatever. But in the mean time, it is my desire to have certain values worked into our systems without the thought process that we are being manipulated here toward an end. I want this church to have biblical values and live as a biblical people.

Now, let me set the context for today's talk. We are going to be looking at 2 Corinthians 8. The historical context is a relief mission that the apostle Paul went on, on behalf of the churches in Judea. At one stage of Paul's ministry, he met with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem who authorized Paul and Barnabas and several other people to go out on the mission field and to concentrate on the evangelization, the sweeping in of Gentiles into the church both in Asia and ultimately it ended up that Paul went to Europe.

But the Jerusalem leaders added a special request of Paul that along with their evangelization, Paul not forget about the poor in Judea. Judea was going through, at that point, a long famine. It appears that the Jewish converts in Jerusalem and Judea, the Jewish converts to Christianity were particularly affected by the famine, perhaps because they were excluded from the Jewish

community. They were excluded from local relief efforts. They had put themselves on the fringe of the community, but the Jewish converts to Christianity were really struggling financially.

So, before they sent Paul and Barnabas out to the mission field, the Jerusalem leaders made a special appeal to Paul to not forget his Jewish brothers and sisters living in Judea and perhaps remember the poor as he went out. And Paul comments in Galatians, “This we were only too glad to do.”

So, as he traveled through Asia and particularly through Macedonia and northern Greece, he gave himself to not only evangelization, but to organizing a major collection for the relief of the churches in Judea. He specifically, then, wrote the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 16, and we are going to take a look at that passage next week, but he wrote to the Corinthian church about planning their giving. And then he followed up his instructions about this relief effort in 2 Corinthians. Let’s take a look at 2 Corinthians 8:

“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. 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. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 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.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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.

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. 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 he does not have.”

Let’s look back at 2 Corinthians 8:1 because this is going to form the basic foundation for today’s talk and really for the foundation of our understanding of giving.

“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches [he is speaking primarily about the church at Thessalonica and the church at Philippi]. Out of their severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

Now, what is absolutely essential in our understanding of giving, whether we are talking about giving money or giving time or giving service, any kind of giving,

is to underline in your Bible, but really to underline in your heart, verse 1 where Paul says, "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches." You know, typically, what is held up in terms of extraordinary giving is a model that suggests that these people who are giving a lot have this superior character. That these folks have really achieved. We hold up the givers and say, "Look at them. Aren't they wonderful people?" We pat these folks on the back and say, "We really like you." We give them all the rewards because they are working their tails off in a church. Or they are giving a lot of money. Paul says, "I want you to clear your mind at the front end of all of your humanistic understandings of giving. As if giving comes from a temperament or comes from some achievement of man or some natural endowment that this woman has." He says to clear those humanistic thoughts from your mind when you look at extraordinary giving. Because the source of giving has to work its way further up the river than simply what a good man or woman is able to do. And wonderfully, Paul says, what I celebrate in this matter of the giving of the Macedonian churches is the grace of God.

Paul goes upstream past the people in the church, past the leaders of the church, past their own temperaments and their own character and all of that and their human abilities. He runs it farther up stream to the true source of any Christian achievement. And he says, "This flows from the grace of God." The ability to give flows from a river that starts at the throne of grace. It runs through human beings, but it starts at the throne of grace, from the God of grace.

As I studied this passage on giving, I was struck by the number of references to grace. Verse 4 literally reads, "They urgently pleaded with us for the grace of sharing in the service to the saints." Not just the privilege, but the grace of sharing.

Verse 6 he says, "Since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion in this act of grace on your part."

Verse 7, "...See that you also excel in the grace of giving."

Verse 9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Verse 19, "What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry [literally it shouldn't read 'the offering,' it should read] the grace."

The word "grace" is used at least six times in these verses because Paul wants us to understand Christian giving as being entirely different than any other giving than we normally think about. Christian giving is not a signal of human merit or humanly produced holiness or will power. Christian giving is present when the grace of God is present. It flows when people are carried along by grace. In an atmosphere where folks are able to actually drink the water of grace from the throne of grace, people then can express the grace of giving. Christian giving is not obligation. Christian giving—financially, service—whatever we are talking about is not responsibility. It is not duty. It is the expression of the grace of God.

And so I want to talk about the grace of giving this morning. Let's pray.

What I would like to do is to talk about some different ways that we can run a dip stick down into our own hearts and really into the heart of a church to see how deep the river of grace is in a place. Grace is not just a doctrine. It is not

just an idea in the New Testament. There is an experience by people of drinking at the river that flows from the throne of grace. And what I am asking is how deep does the river run?

Here is the first way to figure out how deep the river of grace is in a church. Verses 1 and 2:

“And now brothers we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.”

Well, how are they going to see that grace? Here is the test.

“Out of their most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.”

The depth of grace in an individual or in a church is always going to be tested by that individual or that church’s response to a time of severe testing and trial. You simply do not know who you are and we simply don’t know what a church is until the church goes through a period of severe testing or we, as individuals, go through a severe testing. Most of us live off the fat, off the excess.

And so, if we have fat and if we have excess, giving out of that excess says nothing about the depth of grace in our hearts. If I have a lot of time on my hands, the fact that I give a little bit of that excess time really says nothing about how deeply I have tasted of God. And if I have a lot of money, the fact that I give a little bit of my excess says nothing about the depth of my experience of the grace of God. You just don’t know what you have until it is tested until the excess is gone.

We don’t know what the quality of a marriage is really like while we are on our honeymoon. You only know the depth of your love and your commitment in a time of trial and testing. When your spouse has gone through a long-term depression and you hang with them and you love them through their depression, or you love your spouse through their unemployment. Or you love your spouse enough to receive them back after an affair, after they have broken your heart. You love them back into your arms. It is only then that you can say, “Now, I know that I have the grace of loving commitment to this other person in my marriage.”

Flip over to Romans 5. I want you to see something here. It is only after testing that you can really say, “Yes, now I know what I have.” Romans 5, Paul is speaking about grace and he begins saying:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace through God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Since I have gained my acceptable standing through the death and only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, since now that I have acceptable standing with God because Jesus died for my sins and I am resting on that alone.

“Therefore I can have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ for whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”

I can stand in grace—my acceptance with God. Now look at what he says:

“And we rejoice in the hope of the glory not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings. Because we know that sufferings produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us

because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Do you understand that at the beginning of the Christian life or when things are going well, you have a general hope of sharing in the goodness and the glory of God one day in heaven. When things are going well, you have a vague sense of the matter that, yes, one day, because of what Christ has done I will share in the blessed glory of God. And I am going to shine like the stars. That is my hope. His radiance is going to come through my being.

But after trial, after testing, after I have gone through a period of real breaking, of hardship and I have been able to endure by God’s grace in the midst of the trial and the test, I felt God’s hand on me. And I felt like I was being assisted by God to persevere and know that I have gotten through on the other side. I can say, “Yes, I never thought I could get through something like that, but I did persevere.” You know what I have then? Paul says that I have hope. I start with hope and I end, after testing, with hope. But this hope is not a vague shadowy thing anymore. This hope is real. It is concrete. Because I now know that grace is working in my life. I don’t hope grace is in my life. I *know* God’s unconditional, unmerited favor is in my life keeping me going.

You don’t know what you have until it is called into question until it goes through the fire. You have no idea of the quality of your marriage. Until you go through the fire, you have no idea of the quality of your character and what you will or will not do. You don’t know it in easy times. And until we, as a church, go through the fire, we won’t know what we have. You can have a huge church and have most of it burn up.

Let me give a word of encouragement to those of you who are going through the fire right now. You know, some of us can look at our lives and say, “My goodness. It seems like I never get done taking tests. I mean, I think I am done and just catching my breath from the last one and then wham! Another wave, another hurdle, another test. And over the last 10 years; the last 15 years; the last 20 years, we have just gone through a series of things that have really been hard.”

I don’t know about you, but if I was living in that kind of situation, I would have a tendency to ask myself, “How come we have had to go through so much trial and so much testing? I look at other families or other individuals and it seems like their lives have basically been sort of smooth sailing. I mean they have had the occasional little rain storm, but nothing like we have gone through. We are living at the level of the muscle and they seem to have so much excess and so much ease.”

Brothers and Sisters, I want each one of us to know that there is no one here, no one, who is going to escape the test. Everything, Jesus said, is going to be salted with fire. And it seems to me that some of us will be graded off of a series of quizzes that God gives us in life. And you are regularly given pop quizzes regarding your character, regarding your commitments, regarding your marriage, regarding your sexuality, regarding your finances. You are always given these quizzes.

For others, you are going to be given a massive, one score all, final exam on the Judgment Day for all the marbles. No pop quizzes in life, but don't think you are getting off. Because there is going to be a massive final exam that you may or may not be prepared to take because you have experienced so much excess and so much blessing. You may be deceived into laziness and into lazy study habits and a lack of diligence through the course of the semester and then through the course of the year and then through the course of a life. Because you think that goodness is no test at all. Because you think that goodness, you know the easiness in life, is no test at all. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3 that the fire will reveal the quality of each person's work. And if what we build with our lives survives, then we will receive a reward. But if what we built with our life suffers loss, if it is burned up, then we will be saved, but everything we have done with our lives will be burned up and we will enter heaven with the smell of smoke on our clothes.

Well, if you are going through difficulty, don't fret. It may ultimately prove to be mercy to you if you get to take a series of quizzes now. Remember Jesus said, "The first will be last and the last first." Folks who are being tried, I don't know, but you may right now be the recipients of the mercy of God. Some of us are going to have a severe shock later on.

So the first depth test of grace in a church or in an individual's life is the response to trial. And the Macedonians were able to give in the midst of their trial. Which, by the way, parenthetically tells me that we have, as human beings, this wonderful gift of free will that enables us to choose our responses.

You know, almost all of modern therapy and modern approach to human beings is entirely fatalistic. It is the idea that we have been acted upon by all of these forces. And because we are acted upon by all of these forces, we have to be a certain way. So there is this incredible fatalism that because we grew up in poverty or because we grew up in abuse or because we grew up with education deprivation, or whatever it is, we have to be a certain way. And it even comes out as fatalism; this reactive kind of mind-set even comes out in our language. You know, "You made me so mad. The only reason I did that was because I had to. There is nothing I could do about it. That is just the way I am."

The beautiful thing about what we see with the Macedonians and really the biblical approach to people is that we have the ability to choose a response to very painful circumstances. Oh, brothers and sisters, if you could only break the grip of fatalistic thinking in your minds, if you could say that, "I can choose, by God's grace, a different approach. I do not have to react to this upsetting stimulus the way I always do. I can choose a different alternative. I can choose another response. I can be an actor, not a reactor." Then grace can be like what we find with the Macedonians. *"That despite severe trial, their overflowing joy in their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."* These were people who weren't controlled by circumstance. They weren't controlled by the environment, by what is happening to them. They chose, by grace, a different response. The word responsibility says that, the ability to choose a response.

Let me give you a second way to measure the depth of grace in your life or in the life of a church. The test is "Who is begging whom?" Verse 4:

"Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints."

Do you see how extraordinarily deep the grace of God was? How deep the river was of love in this Macedonian church? The church was earnestly pleading for the opportunity to give. The question is who is begging whom in the church? When the church comes along and begs to give, then you have something going on here that is utterly miraculous. That is completely unnatural and can only be attributed to God. This is on the order of the creation of the sun.

Typically, naturally, fund-raising is driven by the appeals and the begging of the leaders of the church. The human-driven fund-raising is that leaders come around with hat in hand and they say, "Please, can you spare any change? We need your money." And then the church and we as individuals feel, you know, a little bit superior. You know, anyone who is the object of an appeal feels superior. So, we ponder in our minds, "What shall we give this beggar?" We say, "Ah, yes, I can take out a nice, crisp \$10.00 bill and drop it in the offering plate. I am quite a good person."

That is what naturally occurs. That is what always occurs unless you have the miracle of grace. And when you have the miracle of grace, the roles change and suddenly, miraculously, the beggar changes from the leaders of the church or the pastor or the relief effort to the people.

And you know, I traced this word "beg" through the Bible and I found that this is absolutely the case. I will give you one example of the reversal of roles miraculously. Mark 5, Jesus encounters a man who is demonized. He is filled with evil spirits and is cutting himself and hurting himself and cursing and all of that. This man meets Jesus, the embodiment of the grace of God. He has an experience of grace. The kingdom comes on him and his demons are thrown out.

By the way, we have been seeing this kind of activity in the church for the last several weeks in a much expanded way. As we have been going through some of these renewal meetings, God is cleaning us out. And what I expect is that this is going to continue until we are clean. And then when we are clean, we are not going to see as much of the demonic showing up. But right now, some of the pastors are up to their ears in casting out demons. This is part of the encounter with the grace of God.

Anyway...the man is freed by Jesus. And you know what it says in Mark 5:18? It says:

"As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go with him. But Jesus didn't let him and said, 'Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.'"

The man begged Jesus that Jesus would let him leave everything and just be one of his followers. Here is a guy who wasn't called. There was no command. He wasn't invited to give up his worldly possessions. He just begged Jesus for an opportunity to follow him anywhere.

When you meet God, when you experience God, the roles change and you are like Isaiah after he meets the Lord in the temple. And the Lord says, "Who is going to go?" Isaiah said, "Here I am." You start throwing yourself into the action.

I want you to follow this through with me. Flip back to the book of Exodus. Who begs who is a good test for how much grace is at work in the church. Again, typically, getting people to serve, getting folks to do child care or getting folks to give time or anything is like pulling teeth. "Ooooooh, Ahhhh! No, these are my precious teeth." But when the miracle happens, you have Exodus 36. And it says in verse 2:

"Then Moses summoned Bezalel and Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord had given ability and who was willing to come and do the work. They received from Moses all the offerings the Israelites had brought to carry out the work of constructing the sanctuary. And the people continued to bring freewill offerings morning after morning. So all the skilled craftsmen who were doing all the work on the sanctuary left their work and said to Moses, 'The people are bringing more than enough for doing the work the Lord commanded be done.' Then Moses gave an order and they sent this word throughout the camp: 'No man or woman is to make anything else as an offering for the sanctuary.' And so the people were restrained from bringing more because what they already had was more than enough to do all the work."

One day, just one day in my life, I want to live Exodus 36. I want to live Exodus 36 in one church. Where the people, [now I have had to do this with individuals who have been touched by the grace of God, where I just had to say, "Stop it. You are giving away too much. Stop. You are too extravagant." I have absolutely said that to individuals.], but to be in the midst of a church where that was the character of the people, that they drank so deeply of God's grace that you just had to restrain it, if that is not revival, then it will do until revival comes.

Let's talk about another measure of the depth of grace and I think we see in verse 7, a thing we are going to plunge into more deeply next week, but that is whether people in the church and whether you as an individual have an abundance mentality or a poverty mentality. Verse 7:

"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."

The word for "excel" is really badly translated in the NIV. The Greek is "see that you abound, or see that you come to fullness." Let me give you some pictures of this word in the New Testament. The word that is used here, in different places is used to express the idea of more than enough. Something that is left over. Something that is present in abundance. To abound. To exceed the usual number. Beyond measure. Surplus.

The reason why we struggle with giving is because most of us don't know this word "abound" personally. Most Christians, most people, operate with a poverty mentality as opposed to an abundance mentality.

The poverty mentality says that if I give something away, then I don't have it and therefore I lose. The poverty mentality hopes that no one else around you

gets complimented more than you. You clutch up inside when you hear the praise of someone else at work, in the church or in your family. Because the poverty mentality says that there is only so much praise to go around. And if someone else gets praised, then you lose. The poverty mentality secretly rejoices in the misfortune of someone else. You hear that someone is not doing well and inside you say, "Great. I mean not great, but great." Because that sort of keeps that person in their place and they don't get ahead of you. This is a picture of shallow grace in the heart.

When a person begins to experience how big and how vast the grace of God is, what an ocean it is, that like the multiplication of the loaves, there will be a lot left over after everyone has eaten, that you eat your fill and yet there is still a bunch of bread left over that is the abundance mentality. The abundance mentality was awakened in the heart of the lost son in Jesus' story. This boy is lying out in the gutter, in the pig pen. He starts thinking back to his father and what he has run away from. He says to himself, "You know, my father's servants have bread enough to spare. Everyone who touches my father experiences abundance, fullness."

Paul speaks about grace abounding. John says, "From his fullness, we have received grace upon grace."

The abundance mentality is not something that is derived naturally. You don't arrive at an abundance mentality from anything that is within you. Having an abundance mentality, that when I give something away, I don't lose. That I get to enjoy more of God, that my Father can give me all that I need and more than I can use, that his goodness is so vast and so deep and so strong that I can experience more than I could ever want.

The abundance mentality is something that is birthed in the soul by the miracle of God when people go to him to drink. They break off that spirit of poverty. Again, this is part of why we are doing these renewal meetings. So that you would know in your experience what fullness of the Holy Spirit means. Not simply with words, but with your experience.

Here is the last test of the depth of grace that is at work in individual lives or in the life of a church and that is our ability to follow through on our commitments. Let's look at verse 6 and then 10-12:

"So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part."

And then in verses 10-12, Paul writes:

"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. 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 he does not have."

You know, there are lots of good Christian intentions to do something that God is calling us to do. We hear about a need and we are very enthusiastic.

"Yes, you know, I am caught up with this. I really feel strongly about the earthquake victims in the recent California earthquake."

“I am very concerned about us beginning to give to the Vineyard and to our local church. I really want to support this thing.”

And I have found, brothers and sisters, that it is the MO, the *modus operandi*, of the post war generation to believe that because we intend good that that is the same as doing good. Or even more so, what is really our MO, is because we talk about something—we’ve gotten together in a Bible study to discuss something—we believe that we have done it. The Bible always draws a major distinction in our minds between words and deeds and yet, we are continually deceived at this point. We think that because we study evangelism and because we understand evangelism and we know the content of the message of salvation, therefore, we have evangelized. Let’s go to another evangelism seminar.

The same thing applies to healing or to deliverance. And obviously discipleship can begin with talk and discussion and seminars, but then we need to get beyond just information to participation. We have to do the thing. We have to actually lay our hands on someone if we are going to say we know anything about healing. We have to see someone get well. And beyond that, we then go on to become trainers of others to do the work of ministry.

And Paul is speaking to a group of people, very much like us, who believe that good intentions are the end of the matter. And he says, “No, I want you to finish it up by doing what you intended to do.”

The sin of procrastination gets in the way, where we put off until tomorrow the completion; we put off until tomorrow the writing of the check; the doing of the deed; the making of the phone call; the writing of the letter; the reconciling of the relationship; we will do it tomorrow. And Paul says, “No, what you resolve before God, do it today. Complete it.”

Now, I want to say one thing about what has been going on in renewal recently, so that you understand about completion and then I want to finish up this section by pointing out something about confrontations about commitment. You know, the Lord was speaking to my heart in this section regarding completing the acts that are begun in our lives. And let me use the illustration of what we have been observing recently regarding various kinds of manifestations of the Spirit that have been increasing in our midst recently. Particularly in our renewal meetings, but we saw an outbreak of this in our spiritual gifts class. We are also seeing this in many of our small groups and other settings. We are seeing the Holy Spirit come and we are seeing physical manifestations that accompany that—shaking, crying, groaning and some very different things than many of you may be accustomed to.

You know, the Lord spoke to me about this. I believe it was the Lord. And he said, “That is not the completion of the work.” His Spirit coming and people experiencing something wonderful is an invitation by the Lord to come to the banqueting table, but it is not the coming to the banqueting table. The Lord sending his Spirit is inviting people to get on the road to repentance. And he is bringing us there. There is an invitation to become a healer or an invitation to a calling like world missions. The Lord, by sending his Spirit, is inviting people. But there is a response needed in the heart after the experience where somebody says, “Yes, Lord, I will walk this out.”

And very often we think that the consummation of the thing, the completion of the thing is the fact that the Spirit of God has fallen on us. No. That is the summons by the Lord.

So, Paul tells these Corinthians, “You had wonderful intentions last year and you talked about the collection to Jerusalem. You were very excited about it. And all of you had wonderful intentions to give; now I want you to complete it.”

I want you to see something here. First, he has no problem as a spiritual father calling people to be responsible in their commitments. Paul is a wonderful spiritual father. I would that one day I could grow to be a spiritual father. There are some things that I would like in my life; there are some things I would love to see happen in the church. One of the things I would like to become as I grow up as a pastor, is I would like to become a spiritual father. And as a spiritual father, Paul has no problem calling people to fulfill their commitments. In fact, in this case it says that he actually called them to account through four different means.

In verse 6, he sent Titus to remind them, “Hey, guys, you intended to make this collection, let’s make sure you do it.” Then, in verses 10-12, he sends this letter urging them. Beyond Titus, he sends a letter. Then in chapter 9 we find that he sends other brothers to make sure that they had collected it. And then, he tells them personally to do it. He used four different ways to remind them about their pledges. It is wonderful that you made a pledge, but now I am going to remind you about it.

It seems to me that many of us get offended when someone reminds us about our commitments. We say, “How dare you remind me that I signed up for a certain service or that I made a pledge or that a part of marriage involves living through this difficult thing. “How dare you call me to live out my vows—my marital vows or my commitments.”

I want you to see, brothers and sisters that this is really a biblical truth that we are allowed to speak to one another about living out our commitments. That part of the test of the depth of grace in the church’s life is spiritual fathering and, also, a soft response. When confronted with my commitments, I say, “Yes, you are right.”

Parents, this is part of your responsibility to your children. A major part of bringing children to maturity is getting them to fulfill their commitments even when it is inconvenient.

“Oh, I know I signed up for the baseball team and I know that they are counting on me, but I am not into playing baseball anymore. And I really would rather play soccer.”

“No, you are going to complete this. You are not going to quit the team.”

“You are not going to quit your piano lessons in mid-year.”

“You are not going to quit before the recital. You are going to learn how to live out your commitments.”

“If you have a babysitting assignment and someone is counting on you, then I am sorry that the school dance is tonight. But, you are going to baby-sit.”

Maturity is Psalm 15, swearing to your own hurt. And parents, we could learn that lesson for ourselves.

“I know I made this commitment, but I am tired. I have had a horrible week. I am depressed. I have this thing or that thing to do.”

If you make a commitment, live it out. It is a testing of the depth of grace—follow through.

So, let's pause and reflect for a moment. You have the extraordinary ability to respond differently to trials than we would expect. You have people begging to give. You are able to follow through on your commitments and you react non-defensively when people remind you about your commitments.

You have this wonderful grace. How do we get this? How do you go to the level of giving where you have to hold people back? And keep it on track so that folks don't burn out and they don't give out and they don't get angry. How do you get grace flowin'?

Verse 5 is the key. This is what holds the chapter together.

“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.”

Do you know why churches get off track? Do you know why giving gets all mixed up? It is because people reverse the order, because they give themselves first to the church. First to people, first to the ministry and then after the church has taken its bite and your work has taken its bite and your family has taken its bite, then if there is anything left over, you give yourself to the Lord. Or, you think that giving yourself to the work of the church and the work of ministry or your family or your job is the same thing as giving yourself to the Lord. And then you find that you are angry and used up and beaten up and burned up and fed up.

The problem is is that it is totally two different things. To give yourself to the Lord and to give yourself to a person or an institution or a ministry or your family or your job or whatever else you are giving yourself to, these are separable things. And there absolutely is an order to keeping your life on track and beginning to experience again a flow of grace, if you haven't been, you give yourself first to the Lord. Not only apart from another human being, you, yourself, give yourself to the Lord.

You start with an initial commitment to Jesus Christ. But then, daily, the first part of your day, you are giving yourself to the Lord, to growing in intimacy with the Lord. You are giving your concerns to the Lord. You are drinking and being refreshed by the Lord. You are finding strength from the Lord. You are hearing counsel from the Lord. You are getting wisdom from the Lord. The Lord becomes your protection and the foundation of your self esteem. So you are not nervously, anxiously, insecurely running around trying to reach into other stuff to make this hole inside go away.

And verse 5's order is the key for living life sanely. Whatever you do and wherever you go, you say, “I give myself first to the Lord.” When you are going on a date, single people, before you step out and get into the car, “Lord, tonight before I give myself in any way, I give you my body. I give you my thought life. I give you my mouth. I give you my wallet. I give you my all.” Before I am going to give myself at my job, I am going to give you myself, Lord, and my ambitions and my competitive spirit.

You see, experience and grace is not like an automatic. It is not like either you get it somehow miraculously or you don't. I think the Lord draws people into giving themselves to him. As the river has been running in some of our renewal meetings, sometimes stronger and sometimes less strong, but God has always been there over the last couple of weeks in our renewal meetings. And we are going to have another one Tuesday night. There is an opportunity to give yourself to the Lord and to drink. Come out and begin to be filled up with the Holy Spirit. Give yourself to renewed intimacy with God. Teenagers, give yourself to the Lord, to experiencing him. Some of you will need to experience spiritual gifts for the first time and what it means to draw near to God in worship.

We aren't worth anything, unless we have given ourselves first to God. If we have given ourselves first to ministries and to things, we will find ourselves, at some point down the road, bruised and battered and no good to anyone.

Of course this grace needs to be modeled to us. Where do we find the kind of grace that I have been describing—this liberality, this ability to give and to believe that you will be supplied, deep grace? Verses 8-9:

"I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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."

Paul is holding up a model in front of the church. He says, "Look at the example of Jesus. Here is your supreme example of the experience of the grace of giving." Jesus experienced the grace of God in the fullest way possible. The spontaneous favor of God was on Jesus' life. And so though he was rich, and no one was ever wealthier than Jesus, he was the only begotten of the Father, through whom everything was created visible and invisible. Jesus the eternal one, the one who always was with God and is God, pre-existent, no one was ever wealthier, emptied himself and became poorer than anyone. In his incarnation, he took the role of a servant. He humbled himself to serve people and then he died a God-forsaken death. Taking on himself the filth, the horror and the sins of the world on the cross. Dying there brutally and crucified naked, exposed to scorn and shame. No one was ever wealthier and no one ever became poorer than Jesus.

And he did it for us, so that you might become wealthy. He opened up the door of grace.