

Abounding Grace

by Dr. J. Vernon McGee



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At the outset, I want to make a very sharp distinction: This message is for Christians only, and that is O-N-L-Y. Why? Because it is on the topic of Christian giving, and God never did ask a non-Christian to give one dime to Him or to His cause. We misrepresent God when we make people believe that He will take a gift from just anyone; He will not. If you are not a Christian, I recommend that you do not give to God's work, because you may gain the impression that you can buy your way into heaven. Some folk think they'll be able to purchase a ticket to heaven — that if they put up enough cash, somehow or other they will get God's acceptance. You cannot do that.

My friend, today the gate to heaven is marked, "Free Admission." It is the only entrance through which bankrupt sinners may enter, which means that in order to get to heaven every member of the human family must go through the entrance marked, "Free Admission." The prophet Isaiah said,

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come to the waters, and he that hath no money; come, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (Isaiah 55:1)

Salvation is a gift. If you gave so much as a red cent toward it, it would no longer be a gift, but you would be making a down payment on a purchase. Salvation is an outright gift of God. Your ticket to heaven has already been purchased by Another, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Those of us who have received God's greatest gift, however, find there are many things He wants to talk to us about. One of those things — and He makes no apology for it — is our relationship to the material things that He gives us and how they are to be used. We have here in the second Corinthian letter, chapters 8 and 9, the most extended and complete section on Christian giving in the entire Word of God. All that you and I need to know about giving to the work of the Lord is here.

First of all, we notice that there are no rules for Christian giving, none whatsoever. God does not give rules to those who are His own. However, He does give certain clear-cut principles. These great principles are to be put into practice in the life of the believer. I repeat: there are no rules for Christian giving. Paul was very clear about this, because the important word throughout this section of 2 Corinthians is the word "grace." It is the high word on the highway of Christian giving.

The word "grace" occurs seven times in chapter 8 and three times in chapter 9. It might be well to look briefly at these different passages in order to pick up the mechanics.

The first place "grace" occurs is in the first verse of chapter 8, for at the very beginning, Paul set the pace and moved to the level of flight that he then sustained all the way through the passage.

Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 8:1)

He spoke of "giving" as being a grace that was bestowed on the churches. You see, it had nothing in the world to do with rules. He put down none here, as we are going to see.

The second place in which the word "grace" occurs is verse 4. Unfortunately, the King James translation does not make it clear. Don't misunderstand me, the King James translation is unusu-

ally good here, but the Greek word translated here as “gift” is actually the word for “grace.”

Beseeking us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift [grace], and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. (2 Corinthians 8:4)

Paul, you see, was saying that the gift they had taken up was a grace.

The third place it occurs is in verse 6:

Insomuch that we besought Titus that, as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also. (2 Corinthians 8:6)

Having given the Macedonians as an example, he said in effect, “I’ve sent Titus to you Corinthians so that this grace, which worked in the hearts of the Macedonians, might work in your hearts also.”

Then we find in verse 7:

Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also. (2 Corinthians 8:7)

Giving is a grace, Paul said, in which they should abound. It is not ordinary grace, but abounding grace.

Now we find this high word again in verse 9:

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Then again in verse 16 — and here it is difficult to see because, when it was translated into English, the word “thanks” was used. You will find in several places that the English word “thanks” is really the Greek word for “grace.”

But thanks [grace] be to God, who put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you. (2 Corinthians 8:16)

Now again in verse 19:

And not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and to show our ready mind. (2 Corinthians 8:19)

The offering that Paul took was a grace. That is an interesting way to speak of an offering, is it not? We call it today the collection; some people like to call it the offering. Well, the Scriptures call it a grace. I have a notion that if we said in the Sunday morning service, “We’re now going to receive the grace,” many would think we were going to return thanks for some food that was

to be served! We don't use that word for the collection, but it was Paul's word for it. Now in the next chapter, we find in verse 8:

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8)

You see, Paul was not after only grace, but *abounding* grace. And then,

And by their prayer for you, who long after you for the exceeding grace of God in you. (2 Corinthians 9:14)

Then he closed this section, as he opened it, with the word “grace,” translated again by our English word “thanks.”

Thanks [grace] be unto God for his unspeakable gift. (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Now, what does the word “grace” really mean? Somebody is going to say, “I know what it means. *Grace* means the unmerited favor of God.” If you say that, you are right. But although it is a true definition, it does not adequately describe this word. It misses its rich flavor and full meaning.

We need to take a closer look at this word for a moment. In the Greek language, “grace” is the word *charis*. “Charismatic” is an English word that has been derived from it. *Charis* is a high word. If you move it way back beyond the New Testament Greek (Koine Greek) and into classical Greek, you'll find that there it also had a very rich meaning. Early in the Greek civilization, *charis* spoke of that which was outward. That thought is carried over in English when we say of a certain person, “Isn't she graceful!” Gracefulness speaks of that which is outward. Some derivatives of the word are: beauty, loveliness, charm, kindness, goodwill, gratitude, delight, and pleasure. The Greeks in their mythology had three goddesses called “the Graces” who conferred everything that was good upon people. You see, “grace” is a word that speaks of everything that is good and fine and noble.

Now the Greeks were missionary-minded. Long before Christianity came to them, they wanted to impart their civilization, their culture, to other people so that they could enjoy it, too. For this reason, “grace” became a word that speaks of imparting something good and fine and wonderful to somebody else. When you do something wonderful for someone else, that's grace.

Then, when the time came for the Holy Spirit to select a language in which to write the gospel, the Greek language was chosen — God, of course, had created this vehicle. Greek was chosen for definite reasons. First, it was the universal language of the first century. By the time of Christ, Greek had disseminated throughout the world. It was the universal language to carry the universal gospel. Second, Greek is a peculiarly expressive language, having words like “grace” that are rich in meaning, and it can tell our God's tremendous message.

So the Holy Spirit took the word “grace” and gave it a new luster, a new glory, as it was adopted by the Christian writers of the New Testament. My friend, the grace of God is His passion to share all His goodness with others. He delights today in doing good. God wants to give of Himself to others — that is His grace. This very moment God wants to do for you the very best — that's His passion, His grace.

The fact of the matter is, this is the reason He saved us.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8)

We emphasize that we are saved by grace, and that is true. The reason God saves us is not because you and I are lovely, it is not because of some good in us, nor is it because He is obligated. He is not! God wants to save us and does save us simply because He wants to. He delights in saving sinners. He takes joy in it. That is grace.

But there is more:

That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7)

Some folk interpret this verse to mean that believers will be put in God's showcase so that throughout the eternal ages we will be on display to show His grace. I do not object to this interpretation at all, but if that is all you see there, I think you miss it, because what God really wants to do is save sinners. He just loves to save! He wants to give all that is good in Him, His best, His all, in order that He might bring sinners to heaven. But friend, that is not going to end it.

Heaven is not static. Throughout the endless ages of eternity, He will be bringing out something new to give us because of His grace. That is going to be one of the glories of heaven. I think that every day the Lord will come forth with something new. When I was a boy, I used to enjoy visiting a certain aunt. She had more gadgets in her house for little boys to play with than anybody I've ever seen. And she never would give all of them to me at once. I would get one on one day, and the next day it would be another, and the next day something else. Oh, say, a week really passed fast when I went there to visit! Now, friend, eternity will be necessary because God will be bringing out all the new and wonderful things He has planned for His own. Yes, we are there for display, to show His grace, but also, throughout the endless ages of eternity, He is going to continue to give of Himself. That is God, and that is grace!

In the early church, believers considered their own giving a grace. God gave so much to them that they in turn wanted to give. For them it was a passion, an overwhelming desire to share the things of God with others. We have rather lost that spirit, haven't we? We have made giving very perfunctory today. We take up an offering, we pass the collection plates, and that ends it. Where is the passion, the overwhelming desire to share what God has done for us? Let me hasten to add this: the first-century Christians never looked upon their giving as charity. Rather, it was simply to be like God in wanting to share what they had with others.

There are two things we need to look at in this passage of Scripture if we are to understand what Christian giving really is. First of all, we must look at the local situation that existed at that time in Corinth, because Christian giving has a wonderful background. Second, we need to see the principles that are derived from the local situation, because these principles are still in existence today. They were articulated into the life of the early church, and they need to be articulated into your life and my life.

One of the objectives of Paul's third missionary journey was not only to preach the gospel where others had not been, but it was to take up an offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem. We

will see in a few moments why this was such a passion of his heart and why he was actually willing to die for the accomplishment of it.

Jerusalem is where missions began. The first church started there, and the gospel began in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Our Lord said to His apostles that they would “be endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). He also told them, “Ye shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). However, these apostles were not as missionary-minded as we might think they were. They locked their arms around their beloved city and did not intend to leave. So God sent persecution. In fact, it was persecution that drove them from the city, scattering them and sending them down the highways of Judea. They would still be in Jerusalem if persecution had not broken out.

Now, this persecution was a horrible thing. Many, beginning with Stephen, were martyred. Christians gave their lives, lost their jobs, and their possessions were confiscated. As a result, the church in Jerusalem was so weakened that it actually became poverty-stricken. Paul, on his third missionary journey, collected an offering for these poor saints. This is about the most revolutionary thing you can hear of. Imagine going to the mission churches and taking up an offering for the home church! If you want to know how revolutionary it is, suppose that your church started receiving gifts from all the places where you have missionaries. Suppose gifts started coming in from Africa, South America, Central America, and the islands of the seas. That would be a sudden turn of events! But the Christians in Jerusalem were in dire straits because of the persecution, and Paul took up an offering for them. This is the background of Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians regarding their gift.

Paul had not been to Corinth on his third missionary journey but had sent ahead Titus, instructing him to prepare the way of the collecting of this offering. From Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we gather that the offering was to be taken before Paul even arrived on the grounds. Paul found that he was not able to come when he said he would, but would be coming along later, and he wrote chapters 8 and 9 of the second Corinthian letter to give these people instructions relative to Christian giving.

Now, my beloved, the color of the local situation has been dissipated. You could not find it in Corinth today. It has long since disappeared. But the principles abide, and they are as sharp and fresh as they were in the first century.

Notice some of these principles that Paul gave. Citing the Macedonians as an example in Christian giving, Paul provided the *motive*, the *meaning*, and the *method* of Christian giving.

Motive and Meaning of Christian Giving

The motive for their giving is revealed here:

And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave themselves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. (2 Corinthians 8:5)

A dedication, or what we might call a consecration service, ought to accompany the offering: “Lord, I come bringing my heart and my hands as well as my gift unto Thee.” Because, honestly, He is not interested in your gift until He has your heart and your hand.

This is not all. There is danger of our saying, “Well, He means for us to give ourselves and

then our substance.” That is not what Paul said. Notice that he said, “And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave themselves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God.” That is, they not only gave themselves to the Lord, but they gave themselves also to the work of the ministry. This is very practical. Paul was careful in this section to make this clear — “I want you to prove your love. I want you to demonstrate that you are sincere.” He wanted them to prove the sincerity of their love.

My friend, you cannot prove your love to God unless you get attached to some of His work down here. They first gave themselves to the Lord. *Then*, Paul said, they “gave themselves...unto us” — that is, to the work of the ministry. Give yourself to Him, and *then* give yourself to whatever the work is. This is the reason we are never to give grudgingly. This is the reason we are to give always with great joy — hilariously! Why? Because we are giving ourselves to something we believe in with all our hearts. We need to be sold out to the ministry to which we give.

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he had just concluded that wonderful fifteenth chapter on the resurrection when he said, “Now concerning the collection...” (1 Corinthians 16:1). Imagine starting the sixteenth chapter like that! Here he had them up on a very high plane, talking about Christ’s resurrection and the promise of the believers’ resurrection, concluding with Jesus’ return when believers will be changed “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Corinthians 15:52). I am sure the saints said, “Brother Paul, keep on talking — we love this kind of truth.” But when Paul said, “Now concerning the collection...” they probably cried out, “Oh, Brother Paul, tell us about heaven’s golden streets!” But Paul wanted them to share the gold in their pockets. He knew that the golden streets would not mean very much to them unless they were doing something for God on the streets down here.

We see the same reaction in the average Christian today. “We don’t want to hear about these mundane things. After all, money matters are not spiritual. We are interested in spiritual things.” My friend, there is nothing as spiritual as an offering. Your gift tells the sincerity of your love. It tells whether your life really belongs to God or not. Therefore, Paul said,

Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give, not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

My, it is hard for some folk to be cheerful and give at the same time, isn’t it? “Oh, my,” they say, “I’ll have to give something — gotta make an impression.” Oh, my brother, please don’t give like that! Give because you are enthusiastic about sharing the good news.

Now, I want you to see how this worked out in shoe leather. Paul said,

Beseeking us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. (2 Corinthians 8:4)

Here is his word “fellowship” again (the Greek *koinonia*), which Paul used to speak of practically everything a believer can share. When Paul was ready to read the Bible to them, he opened the Scriptures and said, “We are now going to bow our heads and have the *koinonia*,” and they prayed together. Anything believers could share together was a *koinonia*, a fellowship. Then Paul said again, “Now we’re going to have the *koinonia*.” That was the third time he’d said it in one service, and I imagine the ushers looked at one another and whispered, “What’s he talking

about now? Do you think he means the Lord's Supper, are we going to pray, or do you think he means the offering?" He could have meant any one of them. Paul probably had to coin another word for the Lord's Supper because the churches were never sure just what he was talking about, since the word *koinonia* meant anything believers shared together.

Now the churches way over in Greece, where the Corinthian church was located, owed the Jerusalem church everything that was spiritual. The fact of the matter is that they owed these believers their very existence. It was the Jerusalem church that had suffered and been persecuted to such an extent that many, including the apostles, were scattered throughout the Roman Empire — and carried with them the gospel.

Now Paul taught these Corinthians that the time had come for them to share, to have fellowship with the Jerusalem church in material things. Listen to him:

But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want, that there may be equality. (2 Corinthians 8:14)

In other words, "The Jerusalem church has shared with you of spiritual things, now I want you to share with them of material things, that there might be an equality here. You ought not to be continually receiving something without sharing that which you received."

This is exactly what he meant when he wrote to the Galatians:

Let him that is taught in the word share with [communicate unto] him that teacheth in all good things. (Galatians 6:6)

That word "communicate" means "to share with." The believers were to share with each other. When you have received something spiritual, the Word of God instructs you to share material things, that there might be fellowship.

This was one of the most lovely things Paul ever did in his life. As he went about preparing to take this offering for the church in Jerusalem, believe me, he was very diligent in collecting the gifts, and he was determined to take them to Jerusalem himself. Do you know why? Because he had wasted the church in Jerusalem. He said:

For ye have heard of my manner of life in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it. (Galatians 1:13)

Paul was partially responsible for the suffering of the believers there. He had persecuted them; he had hated them because he hated Jesus Christ. But now that Paul had been saved, he said, "With my own hand, I am going to take this offering and give it to the Jerusalem church." Isn't that a lovely thing? All along the way, the believers attempted to stop him from venturing into Jerusalem, but Paul said, "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready, not to be bound only but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). In effect, he said, "That's all right, I'm ready to die for Christ. After all, I persecuted the church, and with these hands I'm going to take them this gift." He was a man dedicated to God.

That is what it means to be sold out to God. You don't prove by your lips that you love, you prove it by your actions. A wife does not prove in the parlor that she loves her husband; she

proves it in the kitchen. His favorite apple pie is the evidence. You don't prove your love to Christ by saying it; you prove it by what you do. "I'm taking this offering to Jerusalem with my own hands," Paul said, "and I'm willing to die to do it." So through danger and the threat of death, this man went to Jerusalem to demonstrate his love.

There is something more here, another factor that has to do with both motive and method:

But thanks be to God, who put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you.
(2 Corinthians 8:16)

Paul sent Titus to get their offering, but it was already a grace in his heart. Titus wanted as much as Paul did to take up an offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

And we have sent him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches; and not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and to show our ready mind. (2 Corinthians 8:18, 19)

You see, Titus and his companion had this grace in their hearts. The giving was to be for the glory of God.

Paul said that the primary reason he was taking that offering was for the glory of God. When our offering is not given for the glory of God, there is no other motive entering into it that could please Him.

Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us. (2 Corinthians 8:20)

In other words, "We are going to be honest in the use of the money we collect from you and in the way we handle it."

Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men. (2 Corinthians 8:21)

He said something here that we don't want to miss: "Providing for honest things...in the sight of men." This is the business aspect of church finances. I did not know, until I read a statement by Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, that General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, was ever charged with dishonesty. He was. But that man was a real Bible student, and he had been very careful to heed this admonition. In handling the finances of his organization, he had faithfully rendered a financial statement. It was not long until all the charges of dishonesty were answered, because he was providing "honest things" in the sight of all men. Part of doing things for God is to be honest, not only in the sight of God, but also in the sight of men for the glory of God.

The Method of Christian Giving

For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that which a man

hath, and not according to that which he hath not. (2 Corinthians 8:12)

Christian giving is not mechanical. Hear me now very carefully. I do not believe that any believer today is under the Old Testament tithe. We are not under the percentage basis at all. Giving is not mechanical. Nowhere in the New Testament does God specify that the believer is to give a tenth of his income. But wait a moment — for some people it may be a tenth, but I honestly believe that for others it ought to be more.

During the Depression, I was pastor of a church in Texas. In this town, the only people who actually were able to give during the Depression were the doctors and the man who owned the Coca Cola plant. That gentleman was a personal friend of mine, and we used to hunt and fish together. He had a big ranch down on the river, and one day while he and I were fishing down there, he said to me, “Preacher, why don’t you preach on the tithe?” I passed it off because I didn’t think he was serious. But every time we’d go fishing or hunting, he would say to me, “Why don’t you preach on the tithe?” Finally, one day I said, “I’m going to tell you why.” You see, he was giving more than anyone in the church. He was giving over \$2,000, and I take it that was pretty close to his tithe — and in the days of the Depression, \$20,000 a year, as you may remember, was a lot of money. So I said to him, “Look, I do not think we are under the tithe today. Paul said that as a man is able, so let him give. If he has it, then let him give. If he does not, he’s not able to give. There are some people here in this town who get only about \$1000 a year now, and they’re living on it. I personally believe that God does not ask those families to give a tenth. I don’t really think they should. But the man who is making over \$20,000 a year ought not to give only a tenth, he ought to be giving half.” He never did ask me to preach on the tithe after that. He dropped the subject.

My friend, today giving is in proportion to the way God has prospered you and blessed you. There are some who ought to give a great deal more than the tenth; there are others who perhaps should not give that much.

Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come. (1 Corinthians 16:2)

These instructions are clear — we are to give *as God has prospered us*.

Paul was not appealing to the Corinthians to give. If you read that into this passage, I think you’ve missed it. He knew that they would give.

Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also. (2 Corinthians 8:7)

The thing Paul was interested in was that they gave scripturally — not just because it’s an offering. In effect, he said, “I don’t want you to give because I come and tell you a sad story. I want you to give because the grace of God is working in your hearts, the same grace that saved you.”

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

If you are looking for a standard for giving, here it is: the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He was rich, but He became poor. He came down here and took a place of poverty. Imagine leaving heaven and coming down to this earth to be born in Bethlehem, living in Nazareth, dying on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, and being put into the darkness of a borrowed tomb! He was rich, but He became poor for you and me.

Paul concluded by saying:

Thanks [grace] be unto God for his unspeakable gift. (2 Corinthians 9:15)

My friend, if you are without Christ, God is not asking you for a thing. Not a thing. Instead, He has a gift for you that is so wonderful, I do not have words to describe it. It is called “his unspeakable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15), the gift of His Son. The Father gave Him gladly. He didn’t hold back a thing. The Lord Jesus Christ came to this earth, and He gave Himself for the “joy that was set before him” (Hebrews 12:2). He did it gladly, because He wanted to. If coming back to this earth and dying on a cross this very day would save you, He would come, because He loves you that much. And if you ever get saved, you’ll have to come to Him and receive Him. After you do that, He wants this same wonderful grace to work in your heart.

Grace be unto God for His inexpressible Gift!