

Lesson 3

Generosity is giving our all to others in need

Good Questions Have Small Groups Talking

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2 Corinthians 8

DIG

1. Context. Locate Corinth on a map. Where are these Macedonian churches mentioned in verse 1?



2. Who were the churches of Macedonia?

The particle *de* (now) marks Paul's transition to a new subject. Since the apostle's relationship with his beloved brethren at Corinth had been restored (7:5–16), he could now discuss with them the issue of giving. He began by calling their attention to the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, whom he would use as an example of giving. The Roman province of Macedonia, the ancient kingdom of Alexander the Great, was located in the northern part of modern Greece. As noted above, the three churches of Macedonia Paul had in mind were Philippi,

Thessalonica, and Berea. Macedonia was an abysmally poor region, ravaged by wars and plundered by the Romans. But despite its deep poverty, the Macedonian believers were amazingly generous (cf. 11:9; Phil. 2:25; 4:15, 18). — MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2003). 2 Corinthians. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (276). Chicago: Moody Publishers.

- 3. Why do you think Paul used the example of the Macedonians to teach this lesson? Why not just tell them to be generous? What does that teach us about teaching? We are all called upon to teach from time to time. There are people in all of our lives we would like to influence. What does this teach us about teaching?**

How do you teach people like that to handle snakes? What if we upped the ante? What if we said you had to get it done in three hours? What would you do?

Bandura asked snake-phobics to watch people handle snakes. (Many of these people couldn't even be in the same room as the snake handlers did their thing.) They watched and breathed. Slowly, their heart started pounding a little slower. Their hands got a little less sweaty and their mouth a little less dry. They took a step closer. They paused. They breathed. They took another step. By the time they stepped into the same room as the snakes, some had to wear hockey gear and similar protection. They kept watching the example of the snake handler. They kept getting a little closer. Eventually they could touch the cage where the snake was held. Eventually they could put their hand in the cage. Eventually they could hold the snake. It only took three hours. Three hours. It started with an example. — Josh Hunt. Teach Like Jesus.

- 4. Why is the power of example such a great way to teach?**

Jimmy Carter has long been an advocate for the poor and the homeless. He could get elected president and be an advocate for the homeless. He could give speeches and lead congress to pass laws. He did that. He could influence the federal budget to help providing low income housing. He did that. What else could he do?

He could set an example.

Bill Hybels talks about how Jimmy Carter did this:

Former president Jimmy Carter did this as well as any leader I've ever seen. After his term as president of the United States, he desperately wanted Americans to catch the vision of providing quality housing for under-resourced people. Rather than immediately hitting the speaking circuit, he and his wife, Rosalyn, bought hammers and started hitting nails for Habitat for Humanity.

Hybels reduces it to a slogan: The leader must embody the vision. — Josh Hunt. Teach Like Jesus.

- 5. Reduce verse 2 to a mathematical equation.**

Very severe trial + overflowing joy + extreme poverty = rich generosity.

6. Who would you guess is the more generous group: the wealthy or the poor?

Americans are among the wealthiest people in the world, but we are not all that generous. The most generous are those with the least. Those who earn less than \$10,000 a year give 2.3%. Those who earn more than \$70,000 gave 1.2%. The average is around 2%. In absolute terms, the poorest Christians gave more than all but the wealthiest of Christians. In a world where half of the world's population lives on \$2 a day,⁴² I don't think anyone could accuse us of being generous for giving 2% of our money away. — Josh Hunt. Obedience.

7. Why do you think the poor give more?

A 2009 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that income groups who made between \$10,531 and \$19,301 gave 4.3 percent of their income to charity. Those who made roughly \$150,000 and up were less apt to give, donating only around 2 percent of their incomes.

These numbers are not an anomaly. For decades, surveys have shown that upper-income people don't give away as much of their money as compared with the poor, who are often very generous.

Analysts have tried to determine what makes a person who has less money give away much of what they have even if it means compromising their own standard of living. Although the rich and the poor may have compassion enough to give, the lower-class may be better able to relate to those who are in similar situations. These poorer people may be more connected to other poor people around them. Upper-class individuals may be more detached from the plight of the less fortunate.

Many of the more charitable givers of lower economic standing tend to be religious or spiritual as well. Some have said that they believe the more they give away the more they will get in return, which is often a basis for charity in the first place. Others quote being less worried about money and poverty is a reason they give. Still, there are others who give simply because it makes them feel good. Living with minimal means can often be a challenging time, and putting a smile on someone else's face could be a way for poorer people to brighten their own days.

<http://www.lipennysaver.com/spsect/giving-back/article0003.html>

8. Verse 3ff. How did the Macedonians feel about giving?

And Paul went on to expand his thought: "For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (vv. 3, 4). They gave "beyond" (literally, "contrary to") their ability. St. Chrysostom marveled, "They did the begging, not Paul." The sense is that Paul, seeing their extreme poverty, was reticent to take their gifts because he knew it would deepen their deprivation and plight. But they wouldn't be denied. "Paul, we entreat you, don't deny us this honor." — Hughes, R. K. (2006). 2 Corinthians: Power in weakness. Preaching the Word (158). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

9. Paul says they were poor. Do you think they felt poor?

On the other hand, we can have very little and yet be rich. A rich soul experiences life differently. It experiences a sense of gratitude for what it has received, rather than resentment for what it hasn't gotten. It faces the future with hope rather than anxiety. The apostle Paul discovered that when he was living as a friend and companion of Jesus, who "though he was rich, yet for [our] sakes he became poor." Paul himself experienced richness of being. He became a "more-than-enough" person. He found that whether he was living in luxury or living in prison he had more than enough, because he had been freed from the treadmill of having.

Richness of being is always available. I can seek at any time, with God's help, to be compassionate, generous, grateful, and joyful. And stuff can aid me in this. But usually it will not mean seeking to accumulate more stuff. Richness of having usually means getting more stuff; richness of being is generally associated with giving more stuff. Jesus' goal of "richness toward God" always involves richness of being. — Ortberg, J. (2008). When the game is over, it all goes back in the box. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

10. Verse 5. Note the word "first." Where does generosity begin?

Giving our resources to God is simply a reflection of the fact that we have already given ourselves to Him. We have dedicated our lives to the Lord, consecrating ourselves to His purposes, so it is only a natural thing that we would also offer Him our financial resources. In II Corinthians 8:5, Paul said of the Macedonians, "They first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God." In other words, Paul knew that the believers in Macedonia had not only given an offering of money, but had given themselves to God. The highest, most noble calling for any Christian is that of commitment to Christ. When we do that, consecrating ourselves wholly to Him, financial stewardship is a natural outgrowth. Sacrificial giving is a reflex response to the One who loves us, for He gave His own Son on our behalf.

The principle of prior consecration recognizes the ownership by God of everything. He sovereignly controls all things. Every person in the world belongs to Him. As Paul puts it in Romans 14:8, "We are the Lord's." The prophet Ezekiel quotes God as saying, "All souls are Mine." And I Corinthians tells us that we are not our own; we have been "bought at a price." The Lord owns us. He created us and paid for our souls with His own body. The principle of prior consecration simply recognizes that which is already true: We do not belong to ourselves, but to God. Everything we have is His. When we give an offering, it reflects the fact that we've already given ourselves to Him. — Jeremiah, D. (2001). Giving to god: Study guide (48). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

11. Verses 8ff. The Macedonians were a great example of generosity. Who was a better example? How so?

But, of course, Jesus was and is the great example and motivation for giving. So the apostle reaches for the highest example and the ultimate motivation: "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 by his poverty might

become rich” (v. 9). Though Christ, in his preexistence with the Father, could hold a white-hot star in the palm of his hand, he emptied himself of his riches and became one of us and then died for us—such was his poverty. That was Heaven’s stewardship program—the genesis of the grace of giving—and it is the pattern for us. — Hughes, R. K. (2006). *2 Corinthians: Power in weakness*. Preaching the Word (159). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

12. Verse 9. What does it mean that Jesus became poor?

The one who illustrates this truth better than all others is Jesus Christ. In writing of Him, Paul once said that “though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (II Corinthians 8:9). The Lord of Glory sacrificed riches and honor to become poor and humble. Imagine what it was like for Jesus to come to this world and give up the wealth that was His.

First, He sacrificed a spiritual existence for a fleshly existence. Modern philosophy teaches that flesh and blood is the highest form of being, but the Bible says that a spiritual being is greater than a fleshly being. Jesus existed in spirit, but He took upon Himself a body, becoming human and leaving the spiritual realm to take the form of a man. That was a step down—a sacrifice.

Second, He sacrificed the presence of God for the presence of men. The Bible tells us that Jesus was eternally present with the Father, but when He came to this earth He became Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” He was no longer God with God, but God with us. Being with men can never compare to being with God. He took a step down—a sacrifice.

Third, He sacrificed the beauty of heaven for the streets of earth. The Scriptures teach us that heaven is a wonderful place, far more beautiful than anything here on earth. Jesus was willing to leave it, to sacrifice it, in order to walk the crowded streets of Jerusalem with men. He took a step down—a sacrifice. The Lord walked away from the wealth of heaven in order to come to man in poverty. He sacrificed all that was His to be here with us. — Jeremiah, D. (2001). *Giving to god: Study guide* (59–60). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

13. Paul spoke of Jesus and the Macedonians. Who are some examples of great generosity that Paul might have pointed to if he were living today?

In order to revive the interest of the Corinthian Christians in the offering Paul reminded them of the example set by their fellow Gentile Christians (vv. 1–7) and of the example of Christ (vv. 8–45). And in doing this Paul very wisely appeals to their emotions. This is why a scholarly article on world hunger doesn’t have the impact of a photograph of one three-year-old child whose stomach is swollen with hunger. And it is equally true that when we see generosity acted out in the life of another person it is easier for us to understand it and identify with it. The presence of Mother Teresa in a group speaks volumes because of her own example. As Paul refers in these verses to the Macedonian churches who have given so freely—probably Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea—he gives us several principles of Christian giving that are valid for Christians of all ages. — Chafin, K. L.,

& Ogilvie, L. J. (1985). Vol. 30: 1, 2 Corinthians. The Preacher's Commentary Series (253–254). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.

14. Look over this chapter. Do you think the Macedonians gave a lot of money?

Paul says of the Macedonians that it was their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty which overflowed in a wealth of liberality. It was the joy of the Macedonians which overflowed in liberality. Jesus told the Twelve when he sent them out on the Galilean mission, 'Freely you have received, freely give' (Matt. 10:8, NIV). The Macedonian Christians knew the joy of being the recipients of God's free giving, and in that joy they gave freely. Because of their own situation, what they gave was probably quite a small amount, but measured against their extreme poverty it represented a wealth of liberality (cf. Mark 12:41–44). — Kruse, C. G. (1987). Vol. 8: 2 Corinthians: An introduction and commentary. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (147–148). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

15. Verses 13ff. Is this suggesting income redistribution? Does the Bible support income redistribution?

The problem with this doctrine is twofold: first, there is a mistaken premise in economic egalitarianism that the rich have become wealthy by exploiting the poor. Much of the socialist literature of the past 150 years promotes this premise. This may have been primarily the case back when Karl Marx first wrote his Communist Manifesto, and even today it may be the case some of the time, but certainly not all of the time. Second, socialist programs tend to create more problems than they solve; in other words, they don't work. Welfare, which uses public tax revenue to supplement the income of the underemployed or unemployed, typically has the effect of recipients becoming dependent on the government handout rather than trying to improve their situation. Every place where socialism/communism has been tried on a national scale, it has failed to remove the class distinctions in society. Instead, all it does is replace the nobility/common man distinction with a working class/political class distinction.

What, then, is the Christian view of social justice? The Bible teaches that God is a God of justice. In fact, "all his ways are justice" (Deuteronomy 32:4). Furthermore, the Bible supports the notion of social justice in which concern and care are shown to the plight of the poor and afflicted (Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17; 27:19). The Bible often refers to the fatherless, the widow and the sojourner – that is, people who were not able to fend for themselves or had no support system. The nation of Israel was commanded by God to care for society's less fortunate, and their eventual failure to do so was partly the reason for their judgment and expulsion from the land.

In Jesus' Olivet Discourse, He mentions caring for the "least of these" (Matthew 25:40), and in James' epistle he expounds on the nature of "true religion" (James 1:27). So, if by "social justice" we mean that society has a moral obligation to care for those less fortunate, then that is correct. God knows that, due to the fall, there will be widows, fatherless and sojourners in society, and He made provisions in the old and new covenants to care for these outcasts of society. The model of such

behavior is Jesus Himself, who reflected God's sense of justice by bringing the gospel message to even the outcasts of society.

However, the Christian notion of social justice is different from the contemporary notion of social justice. The biblical exhortations to care for the poor are more individual than societal. In other words, each Christian is encouraged to do what he can to help the "least of these." The basis for such biblical commands is found in the second of the greatest commandments—love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39). Today's notion of social justice replaces the individual with the government, which, through taxation and other means, redistributes wealth. This policy doesn't encourage giving out of love, but resentment from those who see their hard-earned wealth being taken away. <http://www.gotquestions.org/social-justice.html>

16. What is the biblical plan to help the poor?

Another difference is that the Christian worldview of social justice doesn't assume the wealthy are the beneficiaries of ill-gotten gain. Wealth is not evil in a Christian worldview, but there is a responsibility and an expectation to be a good steward of one's wealth (because all wealth comes from God). Today's social justice operates under the assumption that the wealthy exploit the poor. A third difference is that, under the Christian concept of stewardship, the Christian can give to the charities he/she wants to support. For example, if a Christian has a heart for the unborn, he can support pro-life agencies with his time, talent and treasure. Under the contemporary form of social justice, it is those in power within the government who decide who receives the redistributed wealth. We have no control over what the government does with our tax money, and, more often than not, that money goes to charities we might not deem worthy.

Basically, there is a tension between a God-centered approach to social justice and a man-centered approach to social justice. The man-centered approach sees the government in the role of savior, bringing in a utopia through government policies. The God-centered approach sees Christ as Savior, bringing heaven to earth when He returns. At His return, Christ will restore all things and execute perfect justice. Until then, Christians express God's love and justice by showing kindness and mercy to those less fortunate. <http://www.gotquestions.org/social-justice.html>

17. This is a little off topic, but I have to ask. Do you think the Bible supports a progressive tax system where the rich pay a great deal more (in terms of percentage) than the poor?

On the contrary, we have an income tax structure today that is inherently unjust. We almost never hear anybody discuss this injustice. But when God set up a system of taxation, He did things differently. God said I'm going to impose a tax on my people and it's going to be ten percent from everybody: The rich man and the poor man are not going to pay the same amount. The rich man's going to pay much more than the poor man, but they're both going to pay the same percentage. They're both going to have the same responsibility. That way the rich man can't use his power to exploit the poor man, saying, "I'm going to pay five percent, but you're going to pay fifty percent." The rich weren't allowed to do that. Nor were the poor allowed to say, "We're going to pay five percent and the rich are going to pay fifty percent because they can afford it." What that is ladies

and gentlemen is the politics of envy that legalizes theft. Anytime you vote a tax on somebody else that is not a tax on yourself, you're stealing from your brother. And though the whole world does it and though it's common practice in the United States of America, a Christian shouldn't be caught dead voting to fill his own pocketbook at the expense of someone else. Isn't that plain? Isn't that clear? And until we get some kind of flat tax, we're going to have a politicized economy, we're going to have class warfare, and we're going to have the whole nation's rule being determined by the rush for economic advantage at the polls. Don't do it. Even if that means sacrificing some benefit you might receive from the federal government. Don't ask other people at the point of a gun to give you from their pockets what you don't have. That's sin. — R.C. Sproul.

<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/principles-for-voting/>

18. Verse 20. What is the application of this verse for us?

Paul used every safeguard to maintain integrity in the collection of money for the Jerusalem church. Those outside the church can view skeptically the way believers handle money in the church. Financial scandals among high-profile ministries have alerted the non-believing world to the unethical gimmicks that some Christians use. It is possible to avoid mismanagement of God's resources. Does your church or organization have a system of checks and balances that prevent wrongful behavior? Are there financial practices in your ministry that need to be reviewed? Christians must have the highest standard of financial responsibility. — Life Application Study Bible.

19. Paul was teaching that it is not only important that we give, it is important that we take care of the money that is given. Why is this necessary? Christian people wouldn't actually steal, would they? Anyone have a story of how God's people abused money placed in their hands?

Actually, as you know, money and ministry is a very serious matter. I once was approached by a friend who pastored a small church. He shared privately that his meager salary was inadequate and that he could not continue in the ministry without financial help. I wrote him a personal check for \$2,000—only to learn later that he had scammed at least \$50,000 from others with the same story. You've never really been taken until you've been taken by a "brother"—and a minister, to boot! Some preachers pay more attention to the fleece than to the flock.

Paul understood the problem well and had likely witnessed financial abuse. So he took great care with the Corinthian offering and thus provided wisdom for the church down through the ages. — Hughes, R. K. (2006). 2 Corinthians: Power in weakness. Preaching the Word (164–165). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

20. Have you heard the phrase, "you can't out give God"? Do you agree with that statement? How could that statement be abused?

It is doubtful that Paul is referring to an exact quid pro quo because the impoverished Jerusalem church would likely never be able to pay back the Corinthians. But on the other hand, through Paul the Jerusalem church had given the Corinthians the riches of the new covenant—the far greater gift.

The final line of our text with its quotation of Exodus 16:18 underscores the effect of such giving as it describes how equality and reciprocity were maintained under the old covenant when the Israelites went out to gather manna. There the reciprocity was maintained by a miracle of the manna. Now, under the new covenant, it is maintained by normal, gracious giving. The miracle is what God has wrought in the hearts of his children. And that is why Paul's message was not a Sermon on the Amount. Paul leaves the amount of the gift up to the Corinthians, because he is convinced that "the quantity of their giving will match the quality of their changed hearts" (Hafemann).⁵

Like me, you're probably weary of the pop-Christian motivations for giving—like "give and God will prosper you," misapplying Malachi 3:10 as is so often done by modern preachers. One preacher sent out an appeals letter that stated, "You can't outgive God. We have figured out that if everyone who hears our program sends \$67.00, we'll have all the money we need, and God will give it back to you five times over." An astute listener wrote back, "I believe you can't outgive God. So here's my deal: you send me \$67.00 and I'll have the money I need, and then God will give it back to you five times over." Predictably, that was the last appeal he received. — Hughes, R. K. (2006). *2 Corinthians: Power in weakness. Preaching the Word* (161). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

21. What do you want to recall from today's conversation?

22. How can we support one another in prayer this week?