

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who demonstrated God's grace, our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Today's theme is generosity. Generosity is the natural outcome of what I call the circle of God's Grace. As we continue reading through Second Corinthians, we come to this section in chapters 8 and 9 where Paul talks about his collection project he's taking up for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. In these 2 chapters Paul uses the Greek word for grace 6 times. Apparently he thinks grace has something to do with giving and generosity. For Paul, this isn't just an important project, it's crucial to the survival of this new fledgling religion called Christianity. It's not that the poor in Jerusalem are any more important than the Christians in Asia, Macedonia, or Corinth for that matter. They were no poorer or any more persecuted for their faith than Christians elsewhere. What makes the poor Christians in Jerusalem so different that Paul takes up a special collection, not just in Corinth, but from his churches in Macedonia, Thessalonica, and Galatia?

The difference is sort of baked in... Christians from all the outlying areas were largely Gentile converts to Christianity. They had never been Jewish first, then converted to Christianity. The Christians in Jerusalem, on the other hand, were Jewish first, then converts to Christianity. This means in the early Church, right from the get go, there was diversity, discord, and conflict. Questions about the ethics of eating food sacrificed to idols, or the foods that were forbidden in the

Jewish Old Testament or the all-important question of circumcision were constant sources of controversy. Underlying these questions was a basic doctrinal debate: before one can become a Christian, must one first become a Jew? This controversy threatened to divide the early Church and led to the calling of the first Churchwide Assembly. James, Brother of Jesus, Peter and the rest of the disciples, including Paul, all met in Jerusalem. Paul had been ruffling the feathers of the disciples by converting Gentiles directly into Christianity. The upshot of this council was Christians could indeed come directly into the Church without first being circumcised into the Jewish faith. Another important outcome was for the first time Peter and the rest, recognized Christians did not need to be circumcised, nor do they have to abstain from food offered to idols or other dietary restrictions stemming from the Old Testament laws. As with any negotiation, there's always some give and take. Paul agreed to remember the poor of Jerusalem as he went about his missionary work. In the book of Acts Paul says he agreed to the collection because he had precisely that in mind anyway... If Paul already had this collection in mind before it became a part of the deal worked out in Jerusalem, why was it so important to Paul from the beginning. The answer is, as I said, baked in... He knew the differences between the Jewish and Gentile Christians was significant and would destroy the Church if left unchecked. What better way of uniting these two differing groups than through a collection of money. Jesus

famously said where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Through this collection, Paul was establishing the Jewish Christians in the hearts of Christians from all over the known world. Through this collection God would not only help the actual poor folks in Jerusalem, but God would also heal the division between the Gentile and the Jewish converts to Christianity.

By this time, the Jewish Christians already thought they were superior to their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. They lorded it over their heads every chance they got. As a result, there was a good deal of animosity among the Gentile Christians toward the Jewish Christians. Presenting formerly Gentile Christians an opportunity to help the poor in Jerusalem allowed them to feel good about themselves and show the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem they were their equals.

In the Church in Macedonia the folks were enthusiastic to give to Paul's cause, but in Corinth it wasn't easy to convince the Gentile converts to give generously. In Corinth, Paul had already introduced this collection project during the first 18 months while he was living among them. Then, after he left, the Corinthians fell victim to a false teacher. Paul sent his first letter to the Corinthians, then his friend Titus in person, then the letter known as the "letter of tears," and now this second Corinthian letter. God still speaks to us through Paul's account of this collection project. There are several truths we can still learn about giving, generosity, and God's grace.

Gratitude flows from an attitude that all life is a gift from God. If one sees life as a total gift, you begin to have a greater appreciation for every breath you take. If everything is a gift from God, then saying Grace before meals and thanking God for our food becomes habit. It's just what we do. The same is true with giving our offering. When we think of everything we have as a gift from God, then giving some back to God seems like the least we can do.

I said earlier gratitude flows from the unending circle of God's Grace. The Disney movie The Lion King has this great song called the Circle of Life. Grace also consists of a completed circle. God first loved you. The first part of the definition of Grace is God's unmerited love. God's love isn't contingent on you loving him or obeying your parents or living by a certain set of laws and regulations. God loves you because that's what God does. You might have heard this someplace before... God is love! The second part of the circle of Grace involves giving. God loved you so much that God gave. God gave us a wonderful world with so much abundance we could feed every man, woman, and child several times over. God gave us plenty of water to drink and air to breath. God gave us the beauty of creation and eyes to see it. God gave us our senses to feel, taste, see, hear, and smell how wonderful this creation is. Thank God for so many things to taste, see, smell, touch, and feel! My point is that God loved and so, God gave. The third part of Grace is that we receive. If you eat or drink, you're

receiving God's Grace. If you breath, you have just breathed in God's Grace. It really has little to do with accepting Jesus as God's gift of salvation. Jesus is that gift and the sinner can't stop God from giving it any more than you can hold their breath to stop receiving God's gift of the breath of life. So, Grace starts with God's unmerited love, God's gifts of life, and our receiving those gifts. In response to all the abundant gifts God gives, and out of great thanksgiving and gratitude, we're invited to thank God by sharing God's love with others. Because God loved and gave, we received and responded back to God in love. That completes the circle, from God, to us, and back to God. Grateful people, thankful people are by definition generous people. Generous people are natural givers who give because of the love they have received. Why were the Macedonian Christians able to give so much when they were in such abject poverty? They recognized, even in their poverty, they had been given so much from God's endless supply of Grace.

I also want to say a few words to address real and practical aspects of modern giving in the Church. Christians give to the Church for two basic reasons, out of both duty and joy. We give out of a sense of duty because the Church has expenses. If you belong to the YMCA, you pay a certain amount every month or you don't get to use the nice clean pool. The same goes for the Church. Of course, there's more to Christian giving than simple duty to keep the doors open. We give

because we love the God who created us and who sustains the world and everything in it for our enjoyment. The giving that goes above and beyond duty becomes our joy. It works something like this. I really love PJ. I love to see her smile. It gives me joy when she's happy and because I love her so much, I want to say and do things to make her happy. Sometimes I might want to sit on the couch and binge watch Marvel's the Avengers movies, but I know she really wants to get our spare room fixed up into her sewing and craft room. So, I get my lazy self, off the couch, and put her craft table, desk, bookcase and storage shelves together. Knowing the one you love is happy to receive your gift of time, talents, or treasures creates in us the joy of giving. When you give up something you really want in favor of doing good for another, that's called a sacrificial gift. Sacrificial gifts begin where duty and obligation leave off. You'll never feel the joy of giving if all you ever do is your duty and no more. Real joy comes from making sacrificial gifts and knowing the one you love experienced the joy of your love.

May we always find meaningful and important ways to use the collections we raise through our offering. May God continue to bless our Church. May your heart be filled with gratitude for all the wonderful gifts you've received through the circle of God's unending Grace. May your gratitude overflow with generosity and always include both duty and joy. Amen.