

Introduction: *During the time in which the Apostle Paul ministered, the middle class as we know it, was non-existent. The wealthy upper class was smaller in number than the majority of the people who were poor, and many of those were slaves. Furthermore, the Jewish believers in Palestine were experiencing a severe famine. This is the reason behind Paul's appeal to the churches he'd planted, to give a special offering in order to alleviate their suffering.*

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup>In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup>For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup>they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

<sup>5</sup>And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. <sup>6</sup>So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. <sup>7</sup>But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you <sup>[a]</sup>—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

<sup>8</sup>I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. <sup>9</sup>For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

<sup>10</sup> And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. <sup>11</sup>Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. <sup>12</sup>For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

<sup>13</sup>Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. <sup>14</sup>At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, <sup>15</sup>as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."

[Pray]

Perhaps you've heard the one about the carnival strong man who offered \$1000 to anyone who could squeeze another drop out of a lemon, after he was through with it. Several tried, no one was successful. Finally a slight gentleman stood up to take the challenge. Amazingly he was able to squeeze out 3-4 more drops of juice. The observing crowd cheered their approval.

"How did you do that?" the strong man asked in disbelief.

“Not a problem, I do it all the time”, he replied. “I’m the treasurer at the Presbyterian Church!”

We laugh. It’s funny. But it betrays the reality that we believe God is the one who supplies all our needs according to his riches in Glory in Christ Jesus! Which means that we do not need to squeeze or pressure God into supplying our needs. Quite the opposite! God is the opposite of tight-fisted. God is open handed, and open hearted, lavishing grace upon grace.

In fact that is how this chapter begins, and ends. Eight times in this chapter Paul uses the word “Charis” which is translated gift, give, grace. Giving begins when we receive the love of God in Christ as our Savior.

“We love because God first loved us.” I John 4.

“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” John 3:16

Paul offers his first example in (v5), the believers in Macedonia gave themselves to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. In other words, giving is an outgrowth or result of a personal relationship with Christ. When we discover ourselves so loved, we want to love and serve others!

As a missionary, Paul had been sent by the church in Jerusalem, which was initially comprised of Jews who had converted to Christianity. Paul’s mission to share the good news with the Gentiles resulted in “church plants” around the Mediterranean. As noted earlier, these churches were small, the people were poor. In addition, they endured oppressive Roman rule, high taxes, and persecution for their faith.

Yet in spite of this, these churches in Macedonia, including Berea, Thessalonica, Derbe, Phillipi and Lystra all had participated in this relief effort. They contributed to this collection out of their poverty. In point of fact, *“they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup>they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.” (v.3-4)*

Paul hopes that the example of these churches might inspire the Corinthians to respond as well.

Recently in the wake of these horrendous fires in California, I heard a heart-warming story. At a shelter in Chico, word got out among the survivors of the Camp fire, that one of the children at the shelter was having a birthday. In a few hours, people who escaped with little more than the clothes on their backs, put together a birthday party complete with cake, ice cream, and presents for this seven-year-old boy. According to the reporter, there was not a dry eye in the shelter, as everyone sang “Happy Birthday”!

People who had next to nothing were delighted to give, to share, to celebrate. Giving is an act of hope in an unknown future. It was true centuries ago. It can be so today.

Giving is itself a gift. It gives us a great feeling of well-being to be generous, to know that our gift—no matter how great or how small—can make a difference.

Giving brings joy to the giver as well as the recipient.

Giving is a tangible expression of the heart of the Gospel!

Paul does not give a direct appeal and he does not mention the word “money”! Paul gives the Corinthian church several pats on the back, if you will. He commends them for their faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness and love, encouraging them to now excel in “the grace of giving” (v. 6-7). He lays the theological basis for giving which is rooted in grace.

Everything we have is a gift from God—not just our spiritual blessings, our salvation, but our breath, our health, all the physical and material.

Everything that we enjoy is a gift from God.

I read recently (in Reader’s Digest!) about a woman who was at an airport, waiting for a connecting flight. She purchased a newspaper and package of cookies and went on to her gate to wait. As she sat and read her newspaper, she heard a rustling noise. She looked up and was shocked to see a neatly dressed man helping himself to her cookies. Not wanting to make a scene, she reached over and took a cookie herself.

A few minutes pass. More rustling. He was helping himself to another of her cookies, so she grabbed another one. This went on until a single cookie remained. He broke it in two, and handed half to her. Then he stood up and walked away. A short time later boarding for her flight began. She opened her bag to retrieve her boarding pass. To her shock and embarrassment, there she found her unopened package of cookies! How we deal with cookies, depends a lot on whose cookies we think “owns” the cookies.

“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it...” Psalm 24:1 We’d best not forget that! Our “cookies” are a gift from God!

Paul’s most compelling example of a “giver” is that of Jesus Christ—who willingly sacrificed all his heavenly rights and privileges, exchanging them for all the limitations of a human body and inevitable death, in order to give us eternal life! The sacrifice of Jesus did not begin on the cross or even with his birth. It began in heaven, when he set aside his glory and agreed to participate in the incarnation. That is a true example of giving!

Next Paul appeals to Corinthian’s compassion and the fact that they had previously expressed their intention and desire to participate in this collection for those suffering in Jerusalem. He appeals to the Corinthians’ sense of fairness and integrity. Now he encourages them to follow through and keep that promise.

He concludes this portion with an interesting illustration from the history of the people of Israel. After the Exodus from oppression in Egypt, the Israelites wander in the wilderness for forty years. There were several reasons for this, the chief one being their failure to obey God.

However, during the forty years of wandering in the desert, God provides for the people. Their shoes did not wear out! Imagine wearing the same shoes for 40 years! And God provides food for them each and every day.

According to Exodus 16, God provided quail for dinner and manna, or a flakey honey and coriander flavored cracker for breakfast in the morning. They were to eat all they wanted at each meal time, but they were NOT to gather extra. Do you remember what happened if they gathered more than they could eat? Yep—it got maggots and it stunk! The only exception to this was that they could gather more on the sixth morning so they would have enough to eat for breakfast on the Sabbath. That portion never got maggots or stunk!

Why does Paul bring this up to the Corinthians in this context?

God is present tense—God is now—God is concerned about today, just as we should be. No one knows what will happen tomorrow, but if God is present and providing for us now, can God be trusted to be present and provide for us tomorrow? (YES!)

Paul reminds the Corinthians and us that God provided equally for every one of the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. God can be trusted to provide for us today. And, if we have more than we need—“plenty”, then we have enough to share.

Jesus himself taught us, and we prayed earlier this morning: “Give us today our daily bread” Jesus will provide for today. When tomorrow comes, it will be today.

Consider this: How much is enough? How much is too little/too much?

Does God give generously to us so that we can hoard the gifts of God OR does God give generously to us so that we can also be generous?

In a radio interview of a survivor of the Paradise fire, an elderly woman described how she and her daughter got to safety with only the clothes on their backs. She expressed gratitude for the emergency shelter, food and supplies that they had received. When the reporter asked about her hopes for the future, she replied: “We’re just taking this one day at a time.” After a brief pause, she continued: “How ‘bout a hug?” The reporter’s voice wavered with emotion as he signed off. I can only imagine he was as glad to give and receive a hug, as she was.

In that context, giving a hug is a small act. Mother Theresa says: “Do small things with great love.”

The needs of fire victims in California...the needs of the world,...the needs of many in Enumclaw, are immense. Overwhelming. Yet we can do something. We can give as God has

given to us. We can give lovingly, freely, generously-- as God has given to us. Your gifts and my gifts combine to make a more significant difference---your gifts financially? Yes. Your gifts of time, of talent, of sharing and caring, of volunteering and touching lives in our community—all of these will make a difference.

As you and I celebrate Thanksgiving this week, may our celebrating begin by counting our blessings. In gratitude for all of these, may we dedicate ourselves, our time, talent and treasure, to make a difference in a very needy world.

PRAY.