

The Gospels record two encounters of Jesus with rich people, which ended very differently. In one encounter, Jesus counselled the man, “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” That man “became very sad, for he was extremely rich” (Luke 18:18–30). Just a few verses later, Jesus encountered a wealthy man named Zacchaeus who, after a conversation with Jesus, committed, “Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Luke 19:1–10).

What was the difference between these two men? The answer is, grace. Because he had experienced God’s grace, Zacchaeus was generous. In chapters 8–9 of 2 Corinthians, Paul writes about the generosity of grace giving. Kent Hughes states the matter bluntly: “If our professed salvation has not loosed our grip on material things so that we have become giving people, we are not saved, despite our protestations.”

According to 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, the Corinthians had started a collection for the suffering saints in Jerusalem. Those plans had seemingly been thwarted by the falling out between Paul and the Corinthians. But now that Titus had brought good news of reconciliation back to Paul, the collection was back on, and Paul reasserts his call to them to give generously to the poor saints in Jerusalem.

TO THINK ABOUT

When the Corinthians had a falling out with Paul, it seems that they responded by closing their wallets. Is that still a temptation for Christians today? Where might you see this reality played out? What might you say to someone who has resorted to such measures to express their dissatisfaction with matters in a church?

Technically speaking, this text isn’t about regular giving to the church, but about a one-time special gift from one church to another. Still, the motivation behind special giving is, in many respects, the same motivation behind regular giving.

The Examples of Generous Giving (vv. 1–10)

As noted above, this is not the first time that Paul had written to the Corinthians about giving. He had done so in an earlier letter (1 Corinthians 16:1–10). Now, he offers them a model—or two models, really—of what generous giving looks like: first, a human model (vv. 1–7); second, a divine model (vv. 8–10).

1. **The Macedonians’ example (vv. 1–7).** The Macedonian churches were a wonderful example of grace giving. Having experienced God’s reconciling grace in Christ, they opened their hands to those who were in need.

The Macedonian churches (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea) were POOR churches. The word translated “extreme poverty” describes a position of rock-bottom, utter poverty. They were, we might say, dirt poor. They were also “in a severe test of AFFLICTION.” “Affliction” translates a word used of intense pressure, and the idea is that the unbelieving culture was pressing in on them. As Hughes puts it, “They were poor and picked on. The grinding poverty and the crushing tribulation made life very difficult—impossible by our standards.”

TO THINK ABOUT

How do you define “poverty”? How do South Africans in general define poverty? What would be a biblical definition of poverty?

Despite their poverty and affliction, these churches were GIVING churches. They gathered what little they had to give to saints in Jerusalem whom they did not personally know. Therefore, “their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.” It is not their material gift that is described here as their “wealth of generosity,” but the grace of God that was evident in them despite their poverty. Nothing could account for their generosity but the grace of God.

Paul was reticent to accept the gift from the Macedonian churches, knowing that it would deepen their own plight, but they begged him to take it. And since he knew that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), he accepted it from them as evidence of God’s grace in their lives.

TO THINK ABOUT

As you consider this text, how should you think about Christian who “cannot afford” to give generously to meet kingdom needs?

Not only were they giving churches; they were SELF-GIVING churches. And this is the most significant manifestation of grace. When we understand grace, we understand that our lives are not our own, but God’s. And when we understand that, we also understand that our wallets are not our own, but God’s. It’s far easier to surrender a part of you to God when you have already surrendered your all to him.

TO THINK ABOUT

What is the relation between giving yourself to God and giving your possessions to God? Does it do any good to be generous with your possessions if you have not consecrated your whole life to the Lord? Is it possible for the Lord to have your life without having your resources?

2. **Christ’s example (vv. 8–10).** The Macedonian churches were a good example of grace giving, but the ultimate example was Jesus Christ himself. The Corinthians could prove their “earnestness” by matching the giving of the Macedonians, but that wasn’t the greatest example of sacrifice in giving: Jesus was.

The Macedonians had not been guilted into giving; they were generous because they understood the generous sacrifice of Christ. No one every sacrifice more for the sake of others than Jesus Christ. But he was willing to do it for his brothers and sisters. And those who follow Christ should likewise be willing to give generously for their brothers and sisters in Christ.

TO THINK ABOUT

A South African Christian—a member of a Reformed Baptist Church—recently shared this thought on social media: “One of the things I have learnt about Reformed Baptists in my country is that, in general, everything is reformed except the pocket. The most stingy people around!” Discuss.

The Exhortation to Generous Giving (vv. 11–15)

Having pointed to both a human and a divine example of grace giving, Paul now offers some directives to the Corinthians for their own giving to the needs in Jerusalem. Much can be said about these verses, but we can boil his exhortation down to two major directives.

1. **Proportionate giving.** The New Testament affirms time and again that, when it comes to giving, God is more concerned with the heart than with the wallet. That is, he wants Christians to give “according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.” Both the rich and the poor can give great gifts to the kingdom—as long as they give according to what they have, from the heart.

TO THINK ABOUT

While the text before us, as we have seen, is not contextually about regular giving, but about a special, once-off gift, the same principles apply to both forms of giving. That being the case, what about tithing? Are new covenant Christians under obligation to tithe? Why, or why not?

2. **Reciprocal giving.** As Reformed Christians, we are wary of Charismatic abuses in the health-wealth-prosperity gospel, which promises great returns for generous giving. Nevertheless, Paul does suggest a divine sense of reciprocity in giving: “I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, ‘Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.’”

Of course, the Corinthians were deeply indebted to the Jerusalem church in the first place. It was from that church that the gospel had first gone out to eventually reach the Gentiles. But even materially, the principle applies: We should be generous when others are in need because God often uses fellow Christians to supply our needs. Under the old covenant, no one lacked due to a divine miracle with the manna; under the new covenant, no one should lack because of the reciprocal generosity of fellow Christians.