

The Giving Paradox

2 Corinthians 8:1-12

- I. Do you know the difference between a paradox and an oxymoron? The difference is subtle, but important.
 - A. Oxymoron's are two words that used together contradict one another. Here are examples of a few that I found on the web.
 - 1) Government organization.
 - 2) Same difference.
 - 3) Taped live.
 - 4) Plastic glasses.
 - 5) Army intelligence.
 - 6) Pretty ugly.
 - 7) Head butt.
 - 8) Working vacation.
 - 9) Jumbo shrimp.
 - 10) Tax return.
 - B. Paradoxes are words or phrases that appear to be contradictory (at least to common sense), but nevertheless are true.
 - 1) The Bible is full of them.
 - 2) Here are just a few from the teachings of Jesus.
 - a) To find, you must lose.
 - b) To be rich, you must be poor.
 - c) To live, you must die.
 - d) To be first, you must be last.
 - e) To be honored you must be humbled.
 - 3) Today's passage from the writings of Paul contains a number of paradoxes.
 - a) They may appear foolish to those of us with common sense, but they are still true.
 - b) Let's read 2 Corinthians 8:1-12 together and look at the "giving paradox."
 - C. The Corinthian church was near and dear to Paul's heart. He spent a great deal of time there and invested a lot of energy in their health and growth.
 - 1) You could say that Paul spent more time with them than any other church he started.
 - 2) They were also slow to accept his authority, even slower to accept his teaching and constantly getting embroiled in fighting between the factions of the church.
 - 3) Paul challenges them to new levels of commitment by holding up the fine example of faith he encountered in the Macedonian believers.
- II. Let's walk through these verses together and pick out four paradoxes that Paul uses to instruct the Corinthian church.
 - A. The first paradox is this: "ordeal and affliction results in joy."
 - 1) ¹And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. – 2 Cor. 8:1-2.

- 2) The Macedonian Christians are facing a test of their faith. In the face of struggle, turmoil and affliction how will they react?
 - a) Well, they pass with flying colors.
 - b) Their struggle causes them to rejoice. Their joy is overflowing!
 - 3) This is a great reminder to the Corinthians and to us that faith is not an escape.
 - a) When we come to Jesus we don't leave our troubles behind.
 - b) But rather than be overwhelmed by them we can rejoice in spite of them.
- B. The second paradox is also found in verse 2: "poverty brings out generosity."
- 1) ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, - 2 Cor. 8:3.
 - 2) The Macedonian believers didn't have much by any standard.
 - a) They gave anyway.
 - b) The poverty of their circumstances led them to respond even more than could be expected.
 - 3) It seems that their generosity wasn't inspired by the size of their wallets, but by the size of the need.
 - a) It doesn't make much sense that those with very little should be the most generous of all.
 - b) If this was a test for the Macedonians, I think they passed it.
- C. The third paradox is this: "having everything does not result in a generous spirit."
- 1) Look at verse 7 -- ⁷ But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. 2 Cor. 8:7.
 - 2) The Macedonian believers' quickness to give is contrasted to the Corinthians reluctance.
 - a) The Corinthian's are a gifted, prosperous church.
 - b) They just aren't very generous and Paul exhorts them to excel at this one neglected thing.
 - 3) Even though they have much, they also hold on to much. It's hard for God to use what he has to pry out of our fingers.
- D. The fourth paradox is "Jesus became poor so that we can become rich."
- 1) ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. – 2 Cor. 8:9.
 - 2) Paul implies that the Macedonian Christians are following the example of Christ.
 - a) When they give out of their poverty, they recall the poverty of Jesus.
 - b) Philippians 2:7 puts it this way: "but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."
 - 3) The Macedonians generosity recalled the generosity of God who sent his son.
 - a) In the sending, Jesus made himself nothing.
 - b) And by becoming poor we became rich.
 - 4) When we give, "become poor" (certainly not to the level of Jesus), we give loud testimony to the reality of the cross of Christ.
- III. Now, what can this all teach us about the giving paradox? Obviously, something is working differently here than we would imagine.
- A. We learn that the act of giving is more important than the dollar amount attached.

- 1) Isn't that the lesson of the Widow's Mite?
 - 2) [Mark 12] Jesus is in the temple and sees a Pharisee putting a large amount in the offering box and also sees a widow put in a small amount – two pennies – in the plate and calls her gift the greater of the two.
 - 3) At one level the amount of your giving is extremely important.
 - a) There are few things affirmed more times in both the Old and New Testaments than the tithe.
 - b) However, the act of giving – in and of itself- is extremely significant.
 - 4) Giving (tithing) is a test of your character.
 - a) It says a lot about who you trust.
 - b) It says a lot about your priorities.
 - 5) If you look at 8:1-3, you see that the Macedonian believers took joy in the act of giving and weren't first and foremost concerned with the exact amount.
- B. Which leads us to the next thing we learn: that we should respond to need; not to pressure, not to people.
- 1) Look again at 8:4-7 -- ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵ And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. ⁶ So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.
 - 2) Did you notice in verse 4 that the Macedonians were begging to give? They considered giving a privilege to be desired!
 - a) When did giving become an obligation? When we lost sight of the need and started focusing on other things.
 - b) The primary motive behind giving is spiritual.
 - a. God says, "here's a need I want you to do something about."
 - b. If we lose sight of that we give to need, we give to programs, we give to dynamic leaders, but not necessarily to the cause of Christ.
- C. Third, we learn that we give as God gives.
- 1) Once again, we see this clearly in verse 9: ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. – 2 Cor. 8:9.
 - 2) When God gives us what we don't deserve we call that grace.
 - a) When we in turn give, it's also called grace.
 - b) It's a way that grace gets extended – we become the channel that God chooses to let grace loose on the world.
 - 3) If we give as God gives, we want to give, we love to give, and we are grateful when we can give.
 - a) If you claim to have a grateful heart but are not willing to give something is wrong.
 - b) Grace and giving are inseparable.
- D. Fourth, we learn that God wants us to finish what we started.
- 1) ¹⁰ And here is my advice 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. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be

matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. – 2 Cor. 8:10-12.

- 2) Author Kirk Lowery puts it this way, God wants us to be a river, not a reservoir.
- 3) The grace that God gives us is something that should move through us not stay with us.
 - a) God's grace should result in a life that constantly gives and gives and gives.
 - b) So that what God begins in us we see through to completion.

IV. The Macedonians are a perfect example of the Giving Paradox.

A. They give in the midst of ordeal and affliction with joy.

- 1) Their poverty provokes generosity.
- 2) They understand that the appropriate response to grace is giving generously.

B. Using their example Paul is asking the Corinthian church some important questions.

- 1) What is most important?
- 2) What really counts?
- 3) What really matters?

C. One verse in this section we haven't touched on at all: verse 8.

- 1) ⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. – 2 Cor. 8:8.
- 2) Macedonians have passed their test and Paul challenges the Corinthian church to respond in the same way.
 - a) He holds a challenge of generosity before them.
 - b) Is this a test the Corinthians will pass?
- 3) Verse 8 is the capstone of this entire section in many ways.

D. For Corinth, this becomes a time of self-assessment.

- 1) They have to decide how they will respond.
- 2) In spite of having everything, will they respond with a generous spirit?
- 3) Do they understand the poverty of Jesus?
- 4) Do they understand grace?

E. Whether the Corinthians pass this test depends on whether or not they truly understand grace.

- 1) Whether we pass this test depends on whether or not we truly understand that same grace.
- 2) Grace is the key.

V. Giving is a sign that you understand grace.

A. In the New Testament (in the Greek), the word for grace is charis.

- 1) It's used 10 times in just chapters 8 and 9 in 2 Corinthians.
- 2) 5 of those 10 times in today's Scripture.
 - a) 8:1 – grace.
 - b) 8:4 – service to the saints.
 - c) 8:6 – act of grace.
 - d) 8:7 – grace of giving.
 - e) 8:9 – the grace of our Lord.

B. Paul uses charis (grace) so much because he's trying to make a point.

- 1) The gift from God, the good works it inspires and the thanks to God are all grace.

- 2) We can't get any of it right if we don't understand grace.
 - 3) If we don't understand grace we can't give.
 - a) We can't serve.
 - b) We can't love.
 - c) We can't accept God's gift.
- C. At its heart the paradox is this: Giving is not about our generosity, it's about God's grace.
- 1) Our generosity is limited, God's grace is not.
 - 2) When we give we allow our limits to be overwhelmed by God's grace.
 - 3) God's grace flows through us to bring His plans to completion.
- D. It may be a paradox and it may be hard to understand, but I think I can live with that.