

INTRODUCTION

I love talking about grace, and today’s message is entitled, “Grace-Full Living.” When you hear the word graceful, what do you think about? A beautiful ballerina who moves across a stage as lightly as a feather being blown by the wind? If you look up the word “graceful” in the dictionary you’ll find that it means “characterized by elegance or beauty of form, manner, movement or speech.” The opposite of “graceful” is “awkward.”

But the grace-full living we’re talking about today has nothing to do with dancing or movement. You may not know the difference between a pirouette from a plié but you can still be grace-full. You may dance like a bull in a china shop, and never make it to “Dancing With the Stars” (instead you may be so bad you’re in “Dancing With the Scars”) but you *can* be grace-full according to God’s Word. The Bible says of Stephen in Acts 6:8 that he was a man full of God’s grace, and I want to talk about what it means to be men and women living lives full of God’s grace.

Today we enter a new section of 2 Corinthians in which Paul wrote about taking up a collection to help the suffering Christians in Jerusalem who had been the victims of a terrible famine. Paul wrote this letter in about 55 A.D. to the Gentile Christians in Corinth, which was a city in Greece. But the Corinthians knew the Christian movement had started among the Jews in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. In other words, the Jerusalem Church was the mother church for all the congregations that had been born in the twenty years since that first Pentecost, so when the Jewish believers in the mother church were suffering, Paul encouraged these Gentiles to help them by being generous.

Paul was a pretty good fundraiser, because he started by telling the Corinthians how generous the other churches had been. Sometimes when Christians in one church hear about the good things other churches are doing it motivates them to do the same, like the story about the barnyard rooster that wandered away from the farm one day and discovered an ostrich egg. He was amazed at how large it was, so he rolled it all the way back to his barnyard and called all the hens together. He said, “Now girls, I don’t want to be critical, I just want you do see what they’re doing down the road!”

That’s the approach Paul used. He said, “Here’s what the churches in Macedonia have been doing, so what are YOU going to do?”

2 Corinthians 8:1-9. “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. 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. So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 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. I am not commanding you, but I

want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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.”

The Macedonian churches included the churches in Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica. They weren't wealthy Christians themselves, they lived in poverty, but they were still generous.

When I first studied this section on giving, I was surprised to discover the word “money” doesn't appear once. In other words, Paul devotes chapters 8 and 9 to receiving this offering and he never mentions money. It's because generosity isn't about money, it's primarily about grace. I want to make three important observations about grace that we find in this passage.

1. God's grace-gift to me is His Son

Paul began this section by mentioning the grace of God. In verse one we read, “I want you to know about the grace that God has given ...” The word “grace” and the word “give” go together like two peas in a pod. You can't have grace without giving. Grace and giving are two sides of the same heavenly coin. I want you to jump over to the end of this section on grace and giving and see how Paul concludes it. Look at 2 Corinthians 9:15, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” What is God's indescribable gift? It's Jesus.

Think for a minute, what's the greatest gift you've ever received? If you're a believer, your answer has to be “Jesus.” Because our loving Father is a God of grace, He gave His one and only Son. He didn't just give His Son to the world; He gave Him to each of us. Have you ever personalized John 3:16? You can celebrate God's grace to you by quoting it this way: “For God so loves ME that He gave His one and only son that if I will believe in Him I will never perish, but I will have eternal life.”

Grace is one of the most important words in the human language. My personal definition of grace is “God giving me what I NEED instead of what I DESERVE.” Jesus was the very best expression of the Father's grace-full heart. The Bible says that Jesus “came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) And it goes on to say, “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.” (John 1:16)

One of the greatest verses in the Bible that demonstrates the connection between grace and giving is Romans 8:32. The Bible says, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

God has already given us the most precious gift He could have ever offered, His Son. The Bible says that since He has already done that, He will graciously give us *all* things. We shouldn't think that we bother God by our requests, because after the amazing gift of His Son, anything else we ask is small potatoes! It would be like me giving you the keys to my car and saying, “Here, this is a gift for you.” Then if you saw me chewing some gum and you wanted some, would you think, “I really would like a piece of gum, but I'm afraid to ask him because he might not give it to me.” That would be crazy. If I gave you a car, of course I'll gladly give you a piece of gum! God's grace is what motivates us to be generous!

2. My greatest gift to God is myself

The key to why the believers in the churches were so generous is found in the phrase, “they gave themselves first to the Lord.” I recall seeing a humorous cartoon once in which a pastor was about to baptize a man. In the first frame the pastor said, “Remember, Charles, everything that goes under this water belongs to God.” In the next frame as Charles is being baptized he’s holding up his clenched fist with his wallet.” Charles wasn’t willing to give it all to God.

God’s Word never teaches you should give some of *your* money to God, because it’s not yours. The Bible teaches that everything we receive is a gift from God. And only when you give yourself to God will you understand that it all belongs to God.

God doesn’t need or want your money, He wants YOU. Remember, this isn’t a legalistic religion, it’s a loving relationship. Sometimes busy parents try to make up for the lack of time they spend with their children by buying them a lot of stuff. Bad parents spell love T-H-I-N-G-S, but good parents spell love T-I-M-E. I fear that sometimes believers try to compensate for their lack of intimacy with God by trying to appease God with their money. Jesus comes knocking at your door saying, “I want to spend time with you.” And we just slip a \$20 bill under the door and think He’ll be satisfied slipping an extra \$20 into the offering plate.

One time the religious mafia tried to trick Jesus by asking Him if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. If He said, “No” they would have the Romans arrest Him for treason immediately. If He said, “Yes” Jesus would have been endorsing the evil Roman occupation of Israel. But Jesus couldn’t be tricked. He said, “Bring me a coin.” He took the Roman coin and asked, “Whose image is on the coin?” The answer was “Caesar” so Jesus said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” That was a brilliant answer, but He didn’t stop there. What He said next was 1,000 times more brilliant. He said, “And give to God what is God’s.” Caesar’s image was stamped on the coins, but where is God’s image stamped?” Look at the person next to you. That person is made in the image of God. Tell them, “You’re made in God’s image.” So Jesus was saying that we give some of our money to the government, but we ought to give ourselves to God.

The Bible says, “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. (Romans 12:1 *The Message*)

During the 1970s I was a Jesus Freak during what was called “the Jesus Movement.” I had long hair, played the guitar, and led Jesus marches. I can remember attending one youth event in a large church in Birmingham. It came time for the offering and everybody was passing the plate for the college kids to put in a few bucks to pay for the expenses of the meeting. There was one guy on our row who didn’t have any money to give, so he did something I’d never seen before. He took the offering plate, stood up and walked down to the front of the church and placed it on the floor in front of the steps, and then he stepped into the plate on top of all the money that was there. We all started yelling and cheering because we understood what this kid was doing—he was giving himself to God. The last I heard that guy had moved to Russia to be a missionary.

Have you ever offered yourself to God?

3. Grace-full living always inspires grace-full giving

After talking about how generous the other churches in Macedonia had been, Paul wrote, “see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” The words “grace” and “give” go together like two peas in a pod. There is a direct link between grace and giving. I’m not saying that in order to experience God’s grace you must give. The opposite is true: When you’re full of God’s grace you will be a generous giver.

People can be funny about their money. There’s a story about an older couple in Maine who lived during the early days of aviation. Stumpy and his wife Martha went to the State Fair each year and saw a barnstorming pilot offering rides in his open cockpit biplane. Every year Stumpy said, “Ya know, Mahthah, I’d like to get a ride in that theah airplane.” Martha said, “Ayuh, I’m sure you would Stumpy, but that theah airplane ride costs ten dollahs...and ten dollahs is ten dollahs.” One year Stumpy said, “By Jeebers, Mahthah I’m 72 yeahs old, and if’n I don’t go this time I may nevah go.” But Martha said, “Stumpy that theah airplane ride costs ten dollahs...and ten dollahs is ten dollahs.” The pilot overheard their conversation and said, “Folks, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll take both of you up and if you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say one word, I won’t charge you. But if you say just one word, it’s ten dollars.” They agreed and loaded into the airplane. The pilot put the plane in all kinds of loops, rolls, stalls, and dives, but he didn’t hear one word from Stumpy and Martha behind him. He landed and turned to Stumpy and said, “By golly, I tried everything I could to make you holler, but you didn’t.” Stumpy said, “Well, I was gonna’ say something when Mahthah fell out...but ten dollahs is ten dollahs!”

We’ve all known people who were stingy with their money. But God’s grace transforms will transform you from a tight-fisted, stingy person into an open-hearted, open-handed generous person. Here’s God’s directive to His children, “Tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they’ll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life. (1 Timothy 6:17-19 *The Message*)

You may say, “Whoa, that’s not written to me, because I’m not rich.” Well, according to the standard of living around the world most of us are rich. A recent study conducted by the United Nations revealed that if you have a net worth of \$2,200, you are wealthier than 50% of the world’s population. And if you have a net worth of \$61,000, you are richer than 90% of the world’s population. The Bible teaches that life isn’t about accumulating more and more wealth; it’s about receiving everything as a gift from God and then being willing to share it with others.

Ray Stedman writes, “The only true motive for giving is the grace of God, the goodness of God to you. If God has not done anything for you, then, for goodness sake, do not give him a dime. But if he has, then pour it out according to the measure you have received. A wonderful Welch pastor and author, Selwyn Hughes wrote, “Remember this: You can’t serve God and money, but you can serve God *with* money.”

One of the great joys of serving as a pastor is to hear stories about how people are experiencing the grace of God in their lives. Not a week goes by that I don't receive a letter or an email about how God is moving in someone's life NOW. I recently received an email from Danny and Rebecca Burks that illustrates exactly what this passage is about: Danny wrote: Dear Pastor, Just wanted to share with you how God has blessed our lives—we believe because of our commitment to the building campaign. When we entered into the campaign we were apprehensive about making a commitment with the projected downturn in the real estate market. However, after prayer we made our commitment and once again we have experienced the amazing grace of God. We began our commitment in January of 2007. In 2006 real estate sales had been flat and a downturn was projected. As we all now know, there was indeed a sharp downturn in the market. Although Tyler was somewhat insulated from the severe downturn in some areas of the country, our area still experienced a 2.3% decrease in real estate sales and a drop in the average home price. Here's the amazing part—in January 2007 we began to pay our commitment and our sales skyrocketed. Our sales jumped 42% in 2007 and in the first 4 months of 2008 we are up an additional 30% over the same period last year. This month we are closing 19 transactions. God is indeed good! We are now praying about increasing our commitment—can't wait to see what God continues to do. God bless, Danny

Danny and Rebecca have discovered what millions of other believers know: When you trust God as your main resource, wherever He guides, He always provides. Are you living grace-fully? One clear mark is when you are grace-fully giving.

CONCLUSION

Grace-full living is more about giving your life away than about giving your money away. It's about being a channel of the grace of God to others. It's giving people what they need, not what they deserve. Whenever I see an example of grace-full living, it just reminds me of what a grace-full God we serve.

In a time when many of our sports stories are about steroids or high-profile arrests, it's good to hear a sports story that stars grace. It happened a few days ago at a woman's college softball game in Ellensburg, Washington. The two teams, Central Washington and Western Oregon were playing for a spot in the league playoffs. It was the most meaningful game of their careers. There was no score in the top of the second inning, when senior Sara Tucholsky stepped to the plate with two runners on base. Sara was a substitute outfielder who stood only 5 feet 2 inches tall and was batting only 3 for 34 for the season. Sara had never hit a homerun in high school or in her four years of playing in college. She was an easy target for the home-team hecklers who sat behind home plate. She took the first pitch, a strike. Then she swung at the second pitch and when she hit it she knew it was out of the park. She looked up to see the ball sail over the center field fence.

Sara was jumping with joy as she rounded first base, so much so that she missed the bag. So she reversed her direction to return to tag the base and that's when disaster struck. Sara's tendon in her knee snapped and she collapsed on the field.

The two players on base had already crossed home plate, leaving Sara as the only offensive

player on the field. She was crumpled on the ground a few feet from first base and a long way from home plate. The rules of the game stipulated that if any of her teammates or coaches touched her on the field of play that she would be called out. Sara was weeping as she painfully crawled to first base. Her coach thought the only option was to substitute a pinch runner for Sara, but since she had only touched first, that would take away the home-run and change it into a single. So, it looked like the only homerun of Sara’s career would be canceled.

That’s when grace showed up. As the coach was preparing to substitute a runner for Sara, Mallory Holtman (the first baseman for the opposing team) stepped up and asked, “Excuse me. Would it be okay if we carried her around and she touched each bag?” Mallory was the star hitter for the Central Washington team. She was also a senior and had been putting off a couple of knee surgeries herself until the season was over. Now with her post-season career on the line, she offered to help a player who she only knew as her opponent for the past four years.

The umpires conferred and agreed that while none of her teammates could touch her on the field of play there was no rule that prohibited the opposing team members from carrying her around the bases. So Mallory enlisted the help of her shortstop, Liz Wallace, and the two girls gently picked Sara up and started carrying her around the bases. As the home crowd realized what was happening they started standing to their feet and cheering this act of graceful kindness. As she talked about what happened Mallory said, “We all started to laugh at one point; I think when we touched the first base. I don’t know what it looked like to observers, but it was kind of funny because Liz and I were carrying her on both sides and we’d get to a base and gently, barely tap her left foot, and we’d all of a sudden start to get the giggles a little bit.”

When they arrived at home plate, Sara’s teammates met her with tears in their eyes as they congratulated her for her first and only homerun of her career. The fans were standing and cheering as they carried Sara back to the dugout.

Then Mallory and Liz returned to their positions to try to win the game that would extend their softball careers into the playoffs. If Hollywood had been writing the script, then Mallory and her team would win and go to the playoffs, but they ended up losing the game 4-2 and were eliminated. But Mallory didn’t regret for a second what she did. In fact she told a television reporter, “In the end, it is not about winning and losing so much. It was about this girl. She hit it over the fence and was in pain, and she needed help.” What a display of grace-living that resulted in grace-full giving. Mallory and Liz didn’t give Sara what she deserved—a single and a record without a homer. Instead, they gave her what she needed. They didn’t give her justice, they showed her grace. Do you think that would have happened in a Yankees/Red Sox game? If a professional ballplayer was injured while running a base the opposing team would tag him out in a heartbeat and say, “He got what he deserved!”

When I first saw the story of Mallory and Liz carrying Sara around the baseball diamond, I couldn’t help but think what a perfect illustration that is of God’s grace. Like Sara, each of us has been tripped up and injured by our own sin. None of us could make it home on our own because we’re all sinners and fall short of the glory of God. The law is like an umpire that says, “You’re OUT!” But Jesus Christ, full of grace and truth came to us and extended nail-scarred hands, and said, “Excuse me. Would it be okay, if I carry you home?” And it is because of His

grace and His grace alone that we can arrive safely home. As the song says, "In loving kindness Jesus came; my soul in mercy to reclaim; and from the depths of sin and shame; through grace He lifted me! From sinking sand, He lifted me; with tender hand; He lifted me! From shades of night; to plains of light; oh, praise His name, He lifted me!" (Words by Charles Gabriel, 1905)

Let His grace fill you so that you become an unselfish, generous grace-filled person!

OUTLINE

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“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” *Romans 8:32*

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“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. *Romans 12:1 The Message*

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We’ve all known people who were stingy with their money. But God’s grace transforms will transform you from a tight-fisted, stingy person into an open-hearted, open-handed generous person. Here’s God’s directive to His children, “Tell those rich in this world’s wealth to quit being so full of themselves and so obsessed with money, which is here today and gone tomorrow. Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous. If they do that, they’ll build a treasury that will last, gaining life that is truly life. *1 Timothy 6:17-19 The Message*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes