



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1998  
by Mark Ashton

10p

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2 Corinthians 8:1-15      **A Christian's Possessions 2 – The grace of giving**

We saw last week that Jesus calls us out of the materialism that makes so much of the here and now: what we own and what we earn. Instead He invites us to look beyond and to invest in eternity. To be wise investors, yes—but not in the here and now. We are to invest in eternity, to trust a heavenly Father and to seek His kingdom.

Next week we will be looking again from the chapter we're looking at this morning at how Christians give. It will be practical; it will confirm the manner of our giving. But this week it's a little more on the why: the origin, the motivation.

I want to remind you of last week: Jesus calling us to be a different sort of humanity—a humanity that relates to eternity. Contrast that, if you can remember it, with Greenpeace's picture of the human race. I quote to you from a Greenpeace advertisement:

'PLANET EARTH IS  
4,600 MILLION YEARS OLD.

'If we condense this inconceivable time-span into an understandable concept, we can liken Earth to a person forty-six years old today.

Nothing is known about the first seven years of this person's life, and only scattered information exists about the middle span. It was at the age of forty-two that Earth began to flower. Dinosaurs and the great reptiles did not appear until one year ago, when our planet was forty-five. Mammals arrived only eight months ago; in the middle of last week man-like apes evolved into ape-like men, and last weekend the last Ice Age enveloped the Earth. Modern man has been around for the last four hours. During the last hour Man discovered

agriculture. The industrial revolution began just a minute ago.

During those sixty seconds of biological time, Modern Man has made a rubbish tip of Paradise. He has multiplied his numbers to plague proportions, caused the extinction of hundreds of species of animals, ransacked the planet for fuels, and now stands like a brutish infant, gloating over his meteoric rise to ascendancy, on the brink of the final mass extinction and of effectively destroying this oasis of life in the solar system.'

Well, there is truth in Greenpeace's diatribe. Human greed is almost gargantuan. We deplore its global consequences and yet, as we saw last week, the economy of our country is designed to foster it and indeed depends on it. Without your and my insatiable desire for acquisition, the economy of the entire Western world would collapse. It has been put like this: 'Providing man with better pay, better living quarters and medical care will not solve his basic problem for the simple reason that he wants more. He wants his neighbour's pay as well as his own. He wants his neighbour's house, and his wife too. In short he wants all he can get—power, dominion, glory, and the worship of those around him.'

Such is Homo Sapiens since the Fall. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, God has called a new race into being.

It is a race that provides the world with an alternative model for humanity—quite distinct from that brutish infant of the Greenpeace picture. If we want our faith to be credible to the world we live in in 1998, there are two areas above all others in which Christians ought to be seen to be

different:

- (1) our attitude to ageing and death (are you markedly different to your contemporaries in your attitude to ageing and death?)
- (2) our attitude to money, possessions and property.

We saw last week how Jesus calls us to explode the materialism of this age. We march to the beat of a different drum, and we must have a quite different attitude to money.

At the end of his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul deals at length with Christian giving. It's in the context of a collection that was being made in the churches of Asia Minor for the church in Jerusalem. He deals with our attitude to money and to giving. Paul calls it: **this grace of giving** (end of v 7). It couldn't be more different from the world's attitude. The world is saying (in the words of that Russian proverb), 'What's mine is my own. What's yours ... is ... negotiable!' Christianity says: **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** (2 Cor. 8:2-4).

That's actually spooky! It is so out of line with how we human beings expect one another to behave. Look at these Macedonians; they're faced with this collection for poor Christians in Jerusalem:

They gave in affliction: **severe trial** (v 2).

They gave in **extreme poverty** (v 2).

They gave beyond their means (v 3).

They gave spontaneously, without coercion (vv 3-4).

They gave in ignorance (they didn't even know these Jerusalem saints) (v 4).

They had five solid reasons for being financially circumspect in this matter. Instead they were insanely generous. How can we understand this?

We must start with that unique origin of Christian giving.

## 1) The Unique Origin of Christian Giving

It began with the grace of God: **And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given to the Macedonian churches** (8:1). As far as Paul was concerned, the generosity of these Macedonian Christians was not something they were doing. It was something that God was doing. It was something He had given: **we want you to know about the grace that God has given to the Macedonian churches**. Paul is not telling us how wonderful they are; he's telling us how wonderful the gospel is.

The central verse is verse 9—which is central not just for this passage but for the whole chapter and the whole doctrine of Christian giving. It is a lovely verse: **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**.

You'll notice that the impoverishment described there is not an economic one, of course. Jesus was born into an ordinary home, but we've no reason to think that He knew abject poverty during His life on earth. There have been many financially poorer than He. No, it was a greater impoverishment than that. For the Creator to step out of eternity into time, to become a man and live as one of His own creation; greater still for the holy and sinless Son of God to be identified with human sin and to take the consequences of it, so that on the cross He was separated from His Father by our sin, and died in our place so that we might live.

Look again at the verse: **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**. No other has impoverished himself as He did. No one was richer than He was. No one became poorer than He did. And never was more achieved: God, in Jesus, in His love for us brought Himself down and emptied Himself, in order to bring us up.

This verse describes the very nature of God. It is a lovely verse to learn (2 Corinthians 8:9) if you're a verse-learner.

All Christian giving begins there, with the realisation that God is a giving, a self-sacrificing God. It begins with His grace. The grace of God

(there in verse 1 and here in verse 9) replicates itself in the life of Christians. In verse 4 that word for *privilege* is actually the word *grace* in the Greek. It's there again in verse 6: **this act of grace**; and verse 7: **this grace of giving**. Grace reproduces itself. The grace of God creates Christian generosity. So Christians understand their money in the light of the Cross. I don't know if that's how you look at your bank statement—in the light of the Cross?

Please consider verse 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**. Paul does not tell us what it was that he had expected those Macedonians to do. But I think we can speculate for a moment. I imagine he may have been very nervous about talking to these young Christians about collecting money from them for the Jerusalem church. I think he feared that it would put them off. Perhaps it would confuse them about the gospel being a free offer of God's grace. But look again and see what he says in the verse: **they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord**. It was a gospel response they made, despite Paul's fearful expectation that the demand for money would put them off the gospel. They gave themselves to the Lord ... and the rest followed. Christian generosity is always consequent upon God's grace.

A Gift Day of the size we are contemplating next week is only for the converted. Paul was concerned that his appeal for money might obscure the gospel. And I worry for those in the congregation at the moment who are not yet Christians—that a huge Gift Day like this may put you off. It may confuse you that God wants you for your money. And that may either drive you right away from the Church (at least for a week or two until all the fuss has died down again), or you may think that by responding to the Gift Day you can gain some credit with God.

But God does not want our money. He wants us: **they gave themselves first to the Lord**. And they gave themselves to God because God had first given Himself for them: **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** (v 9).

The unique origin of Christian giving is God's grace. If you find that a complete puzzle (to be honest, it's a nonsense—I notice one or two eyes beginning to wander, and I'm not sure I'm connecting there at the moment) can I ask you just for two things? They're rather cheeky things, so forgive me them.

(i) Please don't give next week if what I'm saying about grace makes no sense to you. I can't boss you around; you do whatever you like next week; but it is my earnest prayer that the only people who give will be those who give because they do know and understand God's grace. And it is my earnest prayer that us holding a mammoth Gift Day shouldn't confuse anybody about God's grace. He does not want your money—He wants to give you Jesus. And until that's clear any giving on our part is very dangerous.

(ii) Please don't leave the church . . . just yet. Give us a week or two longer to try and show you what real Christianity is and to try to help you to grasp this grace of God which is at its very heart. Because until we understand that, nothing else makes sense.

The unique origin of Christian giving is grace. And so it follows that the unique motivation for Christian giving is (a) gratitude.

## **The Unique Motivation for Christian Giving is**

### **(a) Gratitude**

Look back to verse 2 again (I'm sorry we're going around the passage and not in as logical an order as we normally would): **Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy . . .** Now that overflowing joy wasn't at giving their money away (they weren't sort of masochistic about it), it was at the grace of God that had reached out to them and saved them. They were so grateful for God's grace.

Do you notice that Paul doesn't mention compassion as a motive? There is nothing about the poverty of the Jerusalem church. We know he had mentioned the famine, but there is not a word about it here. Isn't that the absolute opposite of how human fund raising works? Compassion and guilt are the two great motives for humanitarian fund raising. And so what do we see all the time?

Photographs of diseased and starving children, or mothers breast-feeding undernourished babies. But Paul doesn't say a word about the needs, the human needs, that this money would go to meet. Not here. The motivation for Christian giving is always gratitude. It's response—response to what God has already done—gratitude for His grace.

It's one of these strange paradoxes that we're coming across quite a lot, where Jesus' way of looking at the world is upside down to the way we human beings look. We saw that last week. It is not human need, it is God's grace that motivates our giving.

I wonder if you noticed that the grace that God had given to the Macedonians in verse 1 was not wealth so that they could share it, it was the spiritual gift of generosity. He hadn't made them wealthy, apparently, but He had made them generous. It's not the wealthy, it's the generous.

Before our Gift Day it would be very natural if you said (as I've said to myself), "I hope we've got some rich people in the congregation." But, you know, I don't think we have. The students are probably thinking, "*Well, let's hope the salary earners are bringing in some big figures.*" But God is not looking for the big-money people. He's looking for the generous. He doesn't meet His needs through wealth. He meets them through generosity. And we've discovered in this congregation how absurdly generous students can be. And how enormously they have powered our congregation along, with the spiritual gift of generosity that God has given to them. It's not wealth, it's generosity that God is after.

These are some of the extraordinary paradoxes of the Christian way of looking at the world. Human attitudes to money are taken and put on their heads—as God's grace breaks in upon human lives. The motivation for Christian giving is always gratitude—response to what God has done. It's actually worship. When I use that word I guess that some of us immediately think of lifting hands to God in worship. Paul is saying, well, no, put your hand down into your pocket—that's your worship too.

Our Gift Day is perhaps one of the greatest acts of our worship in the whole year. We make it clear then what we think of God in terms of our wealth. And I'm afraid we don't often do that the rest of

the time (and I speak for myself).

That's what Paul is saying in verse 7. He's putting giving alongside spiritual things that the Corinthians probably rated more highly: ***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.*** Paul is putting spiritual gifts, zeal, love, giving, all on a par.

And so, in verse 8, the focus is not so much on a competition, a friendly rivalry between the Corinthians and the Macedonians, as on the reality of the much vaunted Corinthian spirituality (which you will remember if you're familiar with Paul's dealings with this particular church). That's what lies behind verse 8: ***I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.*** This was the church with the great spiritual gifts. They thought so much of them; and Paul now is pointing them to the spiritual gift of giving. Genuine spirituality will express itself in generous giving because the Christian heart is full of gratitude.

### **(b) Stewardship**

And that gratitude will lead us to an attitude of stewardship.

We will come back to verses 10-12 next week. Let's look now at verses 13-15: ***Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."*** Notice that Paul's concern is relief of hardship, it isn't an artificial equalisation of property. It is from the abundance of those who are better off that Paul expects the needs of those who are worse off to be met. God gives temporal wealth. What we gather is not ours but His, and we may not be gathering only for ourselves. We may not be earning just for ourselves. The Christian answer to that problem posed by the Greenpeace advert is stewardship rather than ownership. As Christians we know that we do not own this Earth. We do not even own ourselves.

Juan Carlos Ortiz, in one of his books, illustrated it like this: ‘When we find Jesus it costs us everything. He has happiness, joy, peace, security, eternity, everything.

So we say, ‘I want this pearl. How much is it?’

‘Well,’ the Seller says, ‘it’s very expensive.’

‘But how much?’ we ask. ‘Well, a very large amount.’ ‘Do you think I could buy it?’ ‘Oh, of course. Everyone can buy it.’

‘But didn’t you say it was very expensive?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Well, how much is it?’ ‘Everything you have,’ says the Seller.

We make up our minds: ‘All right, I’ll buy it,’ we say. ‘Well, what do you have?’ He wants to know, ‘Let’s write it down.’ ‘Well I have £1,000 in the bank.’ ‘Good, £1,000. What else?’ ‘That’s all, that’s all I have.’

‘Nothing more?’ ‘Well I have a few pounds here in my pocket.’

‘How much?’ We start digging. ‘Let’s see: I’ve got £10.50.’

‘That’s fine. What else do you have?’ ‘Well nothing, that’s all.’

‘Where do you live?’ (He’s still probing). ‘In my house—yes, I have a house.’ ‘The house, too, then.’ He writes that down. ‘Do you mean I have to live in my caravan?’

‘You have a caravan? That too, good. What else?’

‘I’ll have to sleep in my car!’ ‘You have a car?’

‘Two of them.’ ‘Both become mine. Now, what else?’ ‘Well you already have my money, my house, my caravan, my cars. What more do you want?’

‘Are you alone in this world?’ ‘No . . . no, I have a wife and two children.’

‘Oh yes, your wife and children, too. What else?’

‘I have nothing left! I’m left alone now.’

Suddenly the Seller exclaims, ‘I’d almost forgotten—you, yourself too. Everything becomes mine: wife, children, house, money, cars, and you too.’

Then he goes on: ‘Now listen, I will allow you to use all these things for the time being. But don’t forget that they are mine—just as you are. And whenever I need any of them you must give them up. Because now I am the Owner.’

‘That’s how it is,’ writes Ortiz, ‘when you are under the ownership of Jesus Christ.’

And this principle of stewardship inevitably involves us in the redistribution of God’s wealth—as God leads.

Well, our time is more than up, so we’re going to stop for today. Let’s just read again verses 5 and 9: ***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. 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.***

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*