**TRUE GIVING HEALS; GRACE OF GIVING**

**(THE MEANING OF OFFERING I)**

March 1, 2015

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Key Verse 8:9 “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.”

They say that the number one reason why people don’t go to church is because the pastor talks about money too often. What should we give? How much? When the subject of Christian giving is mentioned—many people immediately think of tithing. And there is nothing wrong with tithing. There is no commandment in the New Testament from Jesus or the Apostles that says the Christian must tithe. We live under grace, not under the law. If a believer decides in his heart out of love for the Lord Jesus Christ that he will give a tenth of his earnings to the Lord, he is at liberty to do so and God will bless him. But we should not do it as though it is a legal obligation. Many believers use the tithe as a convenient measuring stick—believing that we ought to be willing under grace to do at least as much as an Israelite was required to do under the law.

The big question then is: What is the standard for Christian giving under grace? **There is a saying, “We should give until it hurts.”** Giving until it hurts turns giving into a negative experience. It is demeaning and painful. But in the New Testament, giving is never presented in such a painful manner. Giving until it heals is far more biblical than giving until it hurts. True giving never hurts, true giving heals. In Luke 3:11, Jesus says, “The man with TWO tunics should share with him who has none.” The devil’s reading of this commandment is “The man with ONE tunic should give it to him who has none because God will provide.” **The devil will try to get Christians to believe and act on this kind of falsehood. This temptation to be overly righteous is linked to the temptation of pride. It is exactly what Ananias and Sapphira did in Acts chapter 5. In order to look sacrificial, they promised to give their property, but after they sold the property, they kept part of it for themselves. It was a great sin against God. We can give only what we have, and what we are willing to give.** True giving should be done by grace. **In order to be generous, we have to realize how rich we are and how much God has given us. We have to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

A little background of this passage: There had been a severe famine in the land, and believers in Jerusalem were suffering. Paul was collecting an offering from all Gentile churches to give to the Jerusalem Church. His purpose was to build spiritual unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Ro 15:26-27). It was part of the ministry of reconciliation. The Corinthians had begun to gather an offering. However, they did not follow through on giving it. So Paul, after reconciling with them, encouraged them to finish the task. In doing so, Paul explained the meaning of offering in relation to the grace of Jesus.

Look at verses 1-2. “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.” The Macedonian churches are the Philippians, Thessalonians. Usually when people confront severe trials and extreme poverty, their hearts become dark and they complain out of anxiety, thinking only about their own situation. They turn indifferent, thinking this is normal. They even cultivate a “beggar’s mentality.” When they see only themselves and their situation, they lose their faith. But the Macedonian believers were different. They had overflowing joy in the most severe trial. In extreme poverty, they made a generous offering. They gave no impression of being beggars, or even poor. Rather, they seemed to be rich, while experiencing extreme poverty.

How was this possible? It was because they experienced the grace of God. That is why Paul talked about the grace God had given them. Here “grace” is to receive something that we don’t deserve. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us and forgave all our sins and made us precious children of God (Ro 5:8). That is the real meaning of grace. When the Macedonian churches received the grace of forgiveness they experienced the love of God who did not spare his one and only Son, but gave him up as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Then they gave themselves first to the Lord. Look at verse 5b. “But they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.” In the Macedonian churches, we see Romans 12:1 exemplified. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

In the matter of offering, what God wants is not money, but ourselves. God wants us to have a personal relationship with him through offering. Once David Livingstone was moved by the word of God. He wanted to offer something to God, but he did not have money. When the offering basket came to him, he stood up and said, “Lord, I do not have anything to offer except my own body. Please take me as an offering.” Later he gave his life as a missionary to Africa. Offering is not just about money. It is giving ourselves: our hearts, our labor, our time to God. Out of each 24 hours in a day, we can set aside certain time to share the gospel through outreach and one-to-one Bible study. It is good for college grads to offer a year to God as short term missionaries. Surely God blesses those who do so.

Look at verse 6. “So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.” Paul was inspired by the example of the Macedonian churches so he reminded the Corinthians of their earlier pledge. It is not unusual for people to make pledges to give to God when their hearts are moved. However, making a pledge is one thing and giving the money is another thing. John Wesley often said, “I cannot believe your repentance until your wallet repents.” Martin Luther said, “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind and the purse. Of these three, it may well be that the conversion of the purse is the most difficult.”

Look at verse 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.” The Corinthian believers excelled in many areas. Now Paul asked them to excel in the grace of giving as well. There was a possibility that Corinthian believers might have been influenced by Greek philosophy. In Greek philosophy they regarded spiritual things as good and precious, but material things as evil and worthless. So they didn’t regard offerings as part of spiritual activity. They might have boasted about their faith and knowledge, but looked down on material giving. However, Paul put the same value on material giving that he put on other spiritual activities. Material giving is part of spiritual life. We should strive to offer material to God as much as we strive to excel in faith and knowledge. It is part of our life of faith. In fact, Jesus spoke more about money than he did heaven, or hell, or salvation, or repentance. He mentioned Pray or prayer 289 times; Love 363 times, and Give or giving 1043 times. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). By making an offering, we will be freed from materialism, serve God not money!

Look at verse 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.” The “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” is seen in the fact that “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich.” How rich was the Lord Jesus? To ask how rich Jesus was is in effect to ask how rich God is, because Jesus Christ is God. God owns the whole universe.

How poor did he become? When he came into this world and became a man, he was not born to prestige and power and wealth. He was born in the midst of poverty. But the physical and material poverty was just a minor part of the poverty Paul is referring to in verse 9. The contrast the Bible makes is between the glory Jesus had from all eternity with the Father and his earthly condition. He was the object of the worship of angels. Then he came into the world of woe to endure rejection, misunderstanding and hostility from sinners. From all eternity he experienced perfect unbroken fellowship with the Father as the object of the Father’s love. Then he became on the cross an object of God’s wrath for our sakes. Philippians 2:6-8 say, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

How rich are we now? God has not promised earthly riches. But he has promised to supply our needs. “And my God shall meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). Our salvation in Christ is far more valuable than all the treasures of this world: “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36). If we know Jesus, we are rich with the only riches that ultimately count, namely, we become heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We inherit the kingdom of God.

TV evangelist Charles Stanley talked about prosperity and suffering. He observed that the time when we grow the most is when we are suffering. Because that’s when we turn to God and don’t depend on our own resources. We really encounter God in the midst of trouble. And when things are going well, when we are prosperous, we tend to ignore God and drift down the wrong path. So which do we pray for, suffering or prosperity? Prosperity! We tend to pray for the very thing that will drive us away from dependence on Christ and growth in our Christian walk. What’s up with that? Jim Elliot said, “A man is no fool to give up what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” In the movie The End of the Spear, Jim Elliot gave up his life. But in doing that, hundreds of thousands were made rich. God wants you to be rich like that too. And it starts with giving your life to him. Whether you have been a Christian for 30 years or whether this is all new to you today, being rich starts with giving your life to Christ. If you do not do that, you are destined to a life of spiritual poverty. But the good news is that God’s riches were given at Christ’s expense, not ours. God has no need of your time. He created time. God has no need of your talent. He is talented enough to accomplish anything he chooses without your gifts. God has no need of your money. He is the owner of this universe. No, God wants you to be generous with your time, your talent and your money—not so the church can become rich and not so that God can become rich, but so that you can become rich!

Paul tells us some guidelines for generous giving. Look at verse 10-11. “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. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.” Notice the emphasis on willingness. Paul does not present giving as a matter of compulsion. He talks about the fact that they had a desire to give and they had eager willingness. The first guideline for Christian giving is a willing mind. Personal willingness. The Corinthians were initially willing to give. They were the first to have a desire to give and the first to give. Now he says, complete the work. Bring to completion this act of grace on your part. We see here in the area of money the same approach God uses in relation to our entire life. God has a double claim on our lives. He created us. He also bought us with the precious blood of Christ. But he does not coerce or compel. He prefers that we respond willingly. Look at verse 12. “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” God looks on our heart. The acceptability of the gift does not depend on the amount. It depends on the personal willingness of the giver. If someone says, I don’t have much so I won’t give anything, he has not learned the principle of the willing mind. Remember what Jesus said about the poor widow. She offered two very small copper coins while others offered bundles of money. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others” (Mk 12:41-43).

The second guideline for Christian giving is the principle of proportionate giving. Look at verse 12 again. “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.” This principle is not merely a certain set percentage for all alike. It implies that the one who has more will be able to give not only a greater amount, but also a greater proportion. Give as God has prospered you.

When we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we realize how rich we are. When we realize how rich we are in Christ, we can be generous. True giving is not painful. True giving brings healing and reconciliation.