

Stewardship and Mission

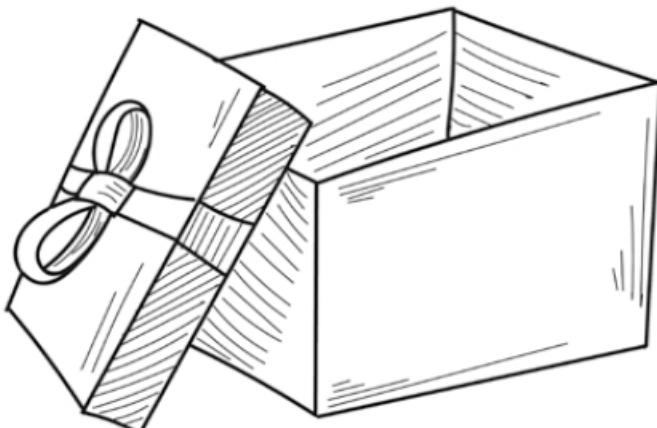
Devotional Reading: Zechariah 8:18–23

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:17–18; Acts 26:12–20;
2 Corinthians 8:1–15; 9:1–15

Acts 1:6–8

⁶ Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”



2 Corinthians 8:3–9

³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Key Text

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. —2 Corinthians 8:9

Enduring Beliefs of the Church

Unit 3: The Church and Its Teachings

Lessons 9–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify characteristics of the generosity highlighted in 2 Corinthians 8:3–9.
2. Explain the context of Paul’s financial collection among Gentile churches of the first century.
3. State one way he or she will practice generosity in the upcoming week.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Epic Generosity
- B. Lesson Context

I. Jesus and the Apostles (Acts 1:6–8)

- A. Disciples’ Question (v. 6)
- B. Jesus’ Response (vv. 7–8)

II. Paul and the Church (2 Corinthians 8:3–9)

- A. Facts (vv. 3–4)
Giving Gladly
- B. Results (vv. 5–6)
- C. Challenge (v. 7)
- D. Test (vv. 8–9)
Excelling in Generosity

Conclusion

- A. More than Money
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Epic Generosity

One of the world’s favorite stories is Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. First as a novel and later as a musical stage play, it has fascinated audiences for generations.

Les Misérables is the story of Jean Valjean, a poor man imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread. Finally released from prison, he is given refuge by a bishop of the church. Valjean repays the man’s generosity by stealing his silverware! But when the police capture Valjean, the bishop says that the silverware was a gift to the man. Stunned by the bishop’s gracious generosity, Valjean becomes a changed man—a person of humble, heroic generosity.

Perhaps what makes *Les Misérables* so beloved is that it illustrates the grace of God. Though we have rejected God’s generosity, he still offers us forgiveness by his grace. Having received that forgiveness, a person can never be the same. God’s gracious generosity begets the same generosity in his people.

B. Lesson Context

The two texts for today’s lesson are dated almost three decades apart. Jesus was crucified during the Passover observance of AD 30, rose from the dead, and appeared physically to his followers for some 40 days thereafter (Acts 1:3) before his ascension. A few years later, Saul (also named “Paul”; see 13:9) met the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus (9:1–19). That interaction led to Paul’s mission trips across the Roman Empire as an apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:8; 1 Timothy 2:7).

Paul was a native of the commercial hub of Tarsus of Cilicia. That city was the capital of a Roman province; therefore, Paul was a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:22–29). At some point in his younger days, he decided to move to Jerusalem to study under Gamaliel (22:3). After Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus, he founded churches in various Roman cities. As people responded to his gospel message, Paul found himself continually needing to bridge the cultural gap between Christ-followers of Gentile background and those of Jewish descent.

We might say, then, that as the first chapter of the book of Acts features the apostles being given their mission and preparing for it, the chapters that follow reveal how that mission was carried out. There were issues regarding aspects of the Law of Moses concerning doctrine and practice as Jews and Gentiles came together. This struggle is most evident in the famous Jerusalem Council in about AD 51 (Acts 15).

The consensus reached at that council served to welcome believers of Gentile background into the church on the basis of the grace of Jesus Christ, not on adherence to the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5–11). This acknowledgment of God's plan was vitally important for establishing the inclusive nature of the church. The importance of that acknowledgment became apparent as certain events unfolded over the following years. One such event is the subject of today's lesson.

I. Jesus and the Apostles

(Acts 1:6–8)

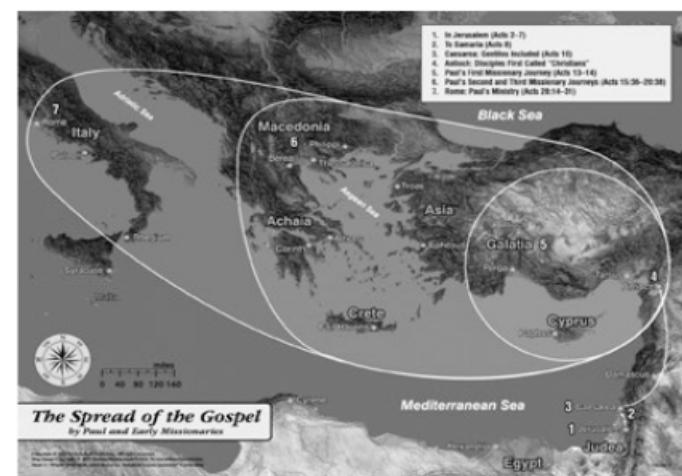
The book of Acts begins with a dialog between Jesus and his apostles at the Mount of Olives before he ascends to heaven. Within the 40-day time period of his appearance to his disciples (see Lesson Context), Jesus directs them to remain in Jerusalem and “wait for the gift my Father promised,” the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5). But as the conversation continues, the disciples reveal a misunderstanding they hold and a desire for something they should not have.

A. Disciples' Question (v. 6)

6. Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

After hearing Jesus' directive to remain in Jerusalem, the disciples *gathered around him* to ask the question we see here. They are convinced that he is the promised Messiah (Matthew 16:16; John 1:41). Their question reflects the expectations of many first-century Jews regarding the timing and nature of the Messiah's task.

Several Old Testament texts likely are the primary drivers of these expectations: Genesis 49:10;



Visual for Lesson 12. *Display this visual as you discuss the events surrounding the spread of the gospel in the first century.*

Numbers 24:17–19; and Isaiah 11:1–6. These texts can be interpreted in one sense to lead the reader to conclude that the Messiah would overthrow the Roman occupiers as he ascended to the throne of David (compare Luke 24:21; John 6:14–15). Thus God is expected *to restore the kingdom to Israel*.

The disciples, therefore, mistakenly anticipate that Jesus will lead a political and militaristic revolt. What better leader could they hope for than the one who has overcome death?

B. Jesus' Response (vv. 7–8)

7. He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Jesus responds, but not in the way the disciples hope. He does not address their concern for Israel's restoration. Instead, Jesus tells them that they are not to be concerned with knowledge of *the times or dates* of such things. This privileged knowledge is for God *the Father* only (Mark 13:32). Earlier, Jesus exhorted the disciples to keep watch, but not to the point of becoming distracted by setting dates for his return (Matthew 24:36–44; 25:13). God is omniscient, meaning that he is all-knowing, including knowledge of things hidden from human understanding.

8a. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;

Jesus redirects the disciples' focus and highlights their unique task as they wait for his

return. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus' command that the disciples remain in Jerusalem until they receive "power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The verse before us moves from the abstract to the specific: the source of that *power* is to be *the Holy Spirit*. One cannot help but see parallels between Jesus' prediction here and the message of John the Baptist regarding a forthcoming baptism "with the Holy Spirit and fire" intimated by Jesus (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16). Both messages echo events on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–3).

8b. "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Holy Spirit's empowerment becomes the starting point for the church. The noun *witness* can be interpreted in at least two ways, depending on context. In one sense, the word *witness* refers to someone who has observed something—a spectator, observer, or eyewitness. In a second sense, the noun *witness* can refer to someone who testifies to something, as in a deposition. Jesus' disciples are already *witnesses* in the first sense, having seen firsthand his ministry, crucifixion, and him personally after his resurrection. But now they are to be *witnesses* in the second sense as they take the gospel to *Jerusalem, . . . Judea, . . . Samaria, and to the ends of the earth* (compare Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 8:1–25).

Many commentators have noted that this sequence of places outlines the gospel's geographic growth as recorded in the book of Acts. Peter first preaches the gospel *in Jerusalem* on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The movement then expands into *Judea*, the region in which Jerusalem is located, and then to the region of *Samaria* to the north (8:1). Initially, only those believers who were not apostles left Jerusalem. But those believers took the gospel message with them (8:4–8; 11:19–21).

The phrase *ends of the earth* emphasizes that Jesus wants his disciples to take his message of salvation to all people and all the world. To do so would be a significant undertaking. Further, Jesus gave them no specifics regarding how they would work to complete this task. The instruc-

tions would come on an "as needed" basis (examples: Acts 8:26; 10:9–20; 16:6–10; 18:9). For the disciples and witnesses to follow through on this task, they must show each other care, hospitality, and financial generosity.

What Do You Think?

What practical steps will you take in the week ahead to become a more effective witness for the Lord?

Digging Deeper

What training and resources will you need to assist you in this endeavor?

II. Paul and the Church

(2 Corinthians 8:3–9)

The next segment of Scripture to study takes us into the middle of a relief project being managed by the apostle Paul. This fundraising initiative is mentioned several times in the New Testament. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church (written about AD 56), he instructed his readers to make weekly contributions to the fund so that it would be ready when he visited (1 Corinthians 16:1–4). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians about a year later. The collection of this gift provides the backdrop for Paul's teachings on stewardship found in 2 Corinthians 8. The timeline indicates that the relief project was a plan spread over several years, given that Paul did not arrive back in Jerusalem until AD 58 (Acts 21:17; 24:17).

A. Facts (vv. 3–4)

3. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,

To make his case to the church at Corinth that they should complete the gift, Paul presents the example of the churches of Macedonia in 2 Corinthians 8:1, which is the antecedent of the words *they* and *their* in the verse before us. Macedonia is the region located directly north of Corinth, and it includes the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (Acts 16:12; 17:1, 13; etc.). When Paul writes to the church in Rome a short time later, he mentions Achaia as well on this same sub-

ject (Romans 15:26); this is the province where Corinth is located.

The Macedonian churches had been experiencing “a very severe trial” and “extreme poverty” (2 Corinthians 8:2; see 1:8), which might have included persecution (see 7:5). But amazingly, the relief collection is not *for* them, but *from* them! Despite their suffering, those congregations have demonstrated joy that has yielded a gift of rich generosity (8:2). In effect, Paul uses the example of the Macedonian Christians to set a standard.

Paul does not give the specific financial amount offered by the Macedonian churches. Instead, he classifies their giving into two categories. First, their giving was *as they were able*, an amount to be expected (compare 1 Corinthians 16:2). The second category, however, goes above and beyond the first: their giving was *beyond their ability*. This giving level reveals that God was at work in and through their sacrificial generosity.

Further, the fact that they were *entirely on their own* indicates that they gave without coercion from Paul. Their generosity was a free response to having received God’s gift of grace (see 2 Corinthians 8:1).

What Do You Think?

Who has been, for you, an example of sacrificial generosity?

Digging Deeper

Which of that person’s habits of generosity would you like to implement?

Giving Gladly

When I think of my parents, I think of their radical generosity. From my perspective, it feels like their financial giving outweighs their income! They give gladly, and the Lord multiplies their gifts for a powerful effect on the church. I frequently ask the Lord to develop in me a generous heart, a heart like my parents’.

The power of financial generosity is not the amount given but the status of the giver’s heart—one that offers willingly and joyfully in service to the Lord. How will you cultivate such a heart? As you ponder that question, think of your generos-

ity as a direct response to the gift of grace that you have received!

—N. V.

4. they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.

Not only do the Macedonian churches give freely, but they also plead with Paul and his companions to receive the churches’ generous financial gift. For believers in one area to provide aid to believers in other provinces is not without precedent (Acts 11:29–30).

The key theme in this verse and this chapter is the fellowship of God’s people. This refers to a complete *sharing* of life with another and the unity God’s people experience as they abide in Christ, receive God’s gift of grace, and freely respond to that gift for the mission of the church (examples: Philippians 1:3–6; 4:14–18). Similar terminology is used to describe the earliest life of the church in Acts 2:42–47. There, we see the believers worshiping, sharing meals, and providing for one another’s needs.

One way to demonstrate unity and fellowship among God’s people is through financial giving. As believers experience unity, they are willing to meet the financial needs of others. In doing so, God’s people embody Jesus’ commands to follow him and care for other believers in Christ (Matthew 25:34–40).

Both the recipients and the givers of the gift are *the Lord’s people* (compare 2 Corinthians 9:1). Although Paul does not here identify the recipient(s) of this gift, they are poverty-stricken believers in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; Romans 15:25–28; 1 Corinthians 16:3).

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you practice fellowship with other believers?

Digging Deeper

Does unity result in fellowship, or is it the other way around? Why?

B. Results (vv. 5–6)

5. And they exceeded our expectations: They

gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us.

Knowing of the precarious situation of the Macedonians, Paul's *expectations* of their ability to give had been in line with that reality. Therefore, he is truly surprised by their overwhelming generosity —one that happened because *they gave themselves first of all to the Lord*. That initial commitment was not to the offering but to Christ. The Macedonians had experienced Christ's love and grace, which, in turn, led them to give their whole lives in service to him and to his people. Their commitment was both the prerequisite and motivating factor for their sacrificial giving to support the mission of the first-century churches. This level of commitment comes only *by the will of God*, as modeled by Jesus, who gave himself on the cross.

6. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.

Having summarized the generosity of the Macedonian church, Paul now challenges his Corinthian readers. The challenge is based on the fact that the Macedonian churches have already finished their giving project, but the Corinthians have not.

A key player in helping the Corinthians do so is *Titus*, a "partner and co-worker" of the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 8:23). He is mentioned by name 10 times in this book—more than in all the other New Testament books combined. Collecting funds for the poverty-stricken Jerusa-

lem church seems to be a primary task for Titus (8:16–9:5).

Paul refers to the anticipated financial gift from the Corinthians as *this act of grace*. Their gift is not being coerced (more on this below). Instead, it will be their response of grace for having received the grace of God themselves.

C. Challenge (v. 7)

7a. But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—

Paul has much to say elsewhere about *faith*, *speech*, *knowledge*, *earnestness*, and *love*. Regarding just the Corinthians, we can list 1 Corinthians 1:5; 12:8; 13:1–2, 13; 14:6; and 16:1–2 on those topics.

7b. see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

Even though the Corinthians excelled in several qualities, completing the offering was an opportunity for them to still *excel* in one more quality —*grace*. Growing in this regard involves the tangible grace of financial *giving*.

What Do You Think?

How is the term *grace* a suitable descriptor of the gift of giving?

Digging Deeper

In what ways can believers grow in the grace of giving?

How to Say It

Achaia	Uh-kay-uh.
Berea	Buh-ree-uh.
Corinth	Kor-inth.
Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (th as in <i>thin</i>).
Gamaliel	Guh-may-lih-ul or Guh-may-lee-al.
Macedonia	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uh.
Macedonians	Mass-eh-doe-nee-uns.
omniscient	ahm-nish-unt.
Philippi	Fih-lip-pie or Fil-ih-pie.
Tarsus	Tar-sus.

D. Test (vv. 8–9)

8. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.

Regarding certain situations, the apostle Paul gives commands to the Christians in Corinth (examples: 1 Corinthians 5:7, 13), and sometimes he merely advises (example: 7:6). The imperative "See that you also excel in this grace of giving," just studied in 2 Corinthians 8:7b (above), seems like a command at first. But Paul hastens to ensure his exhortation is not misconstrued: *I am not commanding you*. Perhaps the clarification is because

previously, he had been much more direct to them regarding their giving (1 Corinthians 16:1–2). Paul desires that the Corinthian believers be generous to other believers in need, but he wants the Corinthians to give out of cheerful love, not compulsion.

Paul notes the reason for his bringing up the example of the Macedonian churches. The Macedonians' *earnestness* in showing financial generosity was the occasion for him to use as an example to the Corinthians. If the Corinthians are similarly diligent, they will prove the *sincerity* of their love (compare 2 Corinthians 8:24).

Excelling in Generosity

My congregation regularly contributes to a fund to meet the needs of families in the community. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been donated to this fund to address housing, food, and education needs.

However, not all acts of generosity are related to money. On the first Sunday of each month, a “repairs café” appears in our neighborhood where people can bring broken household items to be repaired. Those having fix-it skills generously share their time and talents to help others. Generous communities are powerful witnesses, and I’m encouraged to see my neighbors excel in the art of showing generosity through their time, skills, and labor.

Financial giving is one way we can respond to the gift of God’s grace. But in addition, how can you excel in other forms of generosity? If you need a biblical example, see Acts 9:36, 39. —N. V.

9. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Paul appeals to the example of the *Lord Jesus Christ*. Before the incarnation, Jesus *was rich* in ways we cannot grasp. As the divine Son, he is equal with God from eternity (John 1:1–2). These eternal riches did not stop the divine Son from becoming a servant, humbling himself and becoming *poor* for the sake of humanity (Philippians 2:5–8). Through his self-sacrifice, Jesus inaugurated the

riches of the Father’s salvation by making atonement for sin (Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 2:17).

Conclusion

A. More than Money

The Bible reveals God’s expectations regarding how people are to treat each other. One such expectation concerns meeting the needs of the poverty-stricken. The Law of Moses had clear rules in this regard (examples: Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 15:11). And the issue is no less present under the new covenant (examples: Matthew 25:34–46; Galatians 2:10).

Even so, money and its giving are touchy subjects at church, causing many to avoid discussing the topic. The oft-heard complaint, “They’re always asking for money!” has soured many people away from church. Perhaps we should take a different approach to giving, one that acknowledges financial generosity as, first and foremost, a privileged response to God’s grace.

Our generosity results from first acknowledging the generosity of God. Our God is a giving God, demonstrated through his gift of salvation. When we show generosity to others, we are following God’s lead. Our acts of generosity are acts of worship, bearing witness to our testimony of Christ and his great love for us.

What Do You Think?

How will you be generous with your time and resources in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How does the example in Acts 2:42–47 inspire you in this regard?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, you showed us generosity when you gave us your gift of grace through your Son, Jesus. May our thankfulness for this gift be revealed in our heartfelt gifts in return. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Generosity is our response to God’s grace.