

LEADER GUIDE

CHARACTER COUNTS

GENEROSITY

BIG IDEA: God's generous grace moves us to be generous.

DATE: Sunday, September 20, 2026

SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

OPENING QUESTION

We have all heard amazing stories of philanthropists who give away large sums of money through donations, trusts, and foundations. For example, Warren Buffet gives away 99 percent of his wealth. Considering that, in 2023, he made over \$37 million every day, his pledge to give away 99 percent certainly gets our attention.

You may be thinking, *If I had that kind of money, I could be generous too!* That sounds so noble and sacrificial, but if you had \$135 billion (Warren Buffet's net worth) and chose to live on a mere one percent, you would still have \$1.3 billion to scrape by on!

That's a lot of money to give, but is that same as being generous?

Who do you see as a poster child for generosity?

RECAP: While we might commend an agnostic like Warren Buffet for his charitable giving, generosity has nothing to do with the amount. **Generosity is a heart issue**, and we are called to a life of generosity as followers of Christ. In this session, we'll see how God's abundant grace moves us toward a generous lifestyle.

Today we will see **God's generous grace moves us to be generous.**

SETTING THE STAGE

2 Corinthians. Corinth was one of the most prominent cities in the world in Paul's day. Located in the Roman province of Achaia (the southern part of modern-day Greece) along some major land and sea trade routes, it was a metropolitan city that drew people of various backgrounds and religions from all over the world. Paul founded the church at Corinth about AD 50–52 during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-11).

SCRIPTURE READING

2 Corinthians 8:1-9 (CSB)

¹ We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that was given to the churches of Macedonia: ² During a severe trial brought about by affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

³ I can testify that, according to their ability and even beyond their ability, of their own accord, ⁴they begged us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints, ⁵ and not just as we had hoped. Instead, they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us by God's will. ⁶So we urged Titus that just as he had begun, so he should also complete among you this act of grace.

⁷ Now as you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this act of grace. ⁸ I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

DISCUSSION

How would you define generosity?

GENEROSITY: Freely giving good things to others, both material and immaterial, without expectation of repayment. Generosity is a significant theme in both the Old and New Testaments, reflecting God's character and the ethical teachings provided to believers. Deuteronomy 15:7-11 emphasizes the importance of being openhanded and generous. Jesus teaches about the importance of giving to the needy without seeking recognition (Matt. 6:1-4). **Genuine generosity is characterized by a sincere heart** (2 Cor. 9:6-7). Believers are encouraged to cultivate a generous spirit in all areas of life. Generosity fosters unity and mutual support. It addresses social inequities and upholds the church's mission to reach out to those in need. Generosity is all about the posture and condition of the heart.

READ: 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

Why do you think Paul is sharing this story of generosity?

GUIDE: Use the commentary for these verses to give some of the background for the book of 2 Corinthians.

Summarize: In verse 2, Paul gives three relevant observations about the believers in Philippi and Thessalonica:

They were being severely persecuted for their faith. From their infancy as churches, both congregations experienced opposition (Acts 16:20; 17:20). Paul affirmed that in his letters to them (Phil. 1:27-30; 1 Thess. 3:3-4)

They experienced deep poverty. Paul picked his words in the original language very carefully. He didn't just say they were in poverty but adds that it was deep poverty or, as one commentator puts it, "rock-bottom poverty." It doesn't describe just missing a paycheck or two.

They lived in abundant joy. Their affliction had not squelched their joy. Their circumstances were bleak, but they weren't. In this they imitated Paul's own experience.

Recap: The Macedonian Christians weren't robots. They chose to be generous in a time of difficulty.

But God's grace was overwhelming to them and so they gave. It wasn't because they had plenty to give; they didn't. But they had been given so much from God. I can almost hear one of them say, "How can I keep from giving to others when Jesus has given so much to me?"

Generosity doesn't depend on having financial wealth, but rather a deep spiritual commitment to the Lord. It's the response of those to whom the grace of God has become real.

What is the relationship between joy and generosity?

What role does generosity play in our stewardship?

How have you seen our church, a ministry or a LifeGroup be generous?

Transition: Generosity does not depend on wealth. In the next verses, we also see that generosity begins with giving ourselves to God.

READ: 2 Corinthians 8:3-6

Recap: The specific object of the collection Paul received from the churches isn't certain. It's possible it was directed towards the relief of believers in Jerusalem and/or Judea (Acts 11:29, 12:25; Rom. 15:27). It's also possible Paul was referring to some other relief project for fellow believers. Either way, the response from the Macedonian believers was astounding.

The popular expression "give until it hurts" barely describes this situation. They didn't give out of their abundance but out of their poverty. Neither did they give under duress. Paul made it clear to the Corinthians he hadn't manipulated or pressured these sacrificial gifts.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses on the next page of the Leader Guide to further explain the Macedonians' privilege of sharing.

Why do our motivations matter when it comes to giving?

T-shirt ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): This object lesson is to help the group consider how we can expand our hearts toward generosity. In advance, bring an old T-shirt and ask the group what they do with T-shirts that have shrunk and why.

Say: A shrunken, selfish character doesn't fit a follower of Jesus. Just as there are ways to expand shirts to make them bigger, there are ways to expand a character of generosity. The first step to expand shrunken clothes is to soak them in water and gentle soap. To grow in generosity, we must soak in God's grace to us. The next step is to stretch the item of clothing back to its original shape and size. We expand in generosity when we allow God to use hardships to stretch our faith, when we stretch ourselves by sacrificially giving, and when we listen to leaders, who, like Paul did with the Corinthians, pull us to a higher spiritual attainment of Christlike character.

Discuss: How have you learned to be generous? When have you been stretched? What do you find challenging about giving?

Recap: If we only remember one thing about generosity, it needs to be this: It's an act of grace that leaves no room for self-congratulations. When our focus is on something other than the Lord, giving can become a platform for empty pride. But when it flows from a deep sense of gratitude for

all that God has done for you, then it reflects His wonderful grace.

Transition: In the next verses, we see that generosity is a response to Christ's generous love for us.

READ: 2 Corinthians 8:7-9

"Generosity Check" help the group assess their own generosity by asking them to close their eyes and reflect on the answers to these questions:

- When I have the opportunity to be generous, do I view it as a "get to" or a "have to"?
- Do I give according to my ability?
- Do I seek to give "even beyond" my ability?
- Do I see an opportunity to share the needs of others as a "privilege?"
- Do I give as a response to the generosity I've received through Jesus?

Close out this time of reflection with praying over your group: Spend a few moments thanking Jesus for the generosity He modeled for us even as we assess our own generosity toward others. Ask Him to help us be bold in our own generosity going forward.

Recap: Paul wasn't using the Macedonian's example to start a generosity contest between them and the Corinthians. But he was helping them think about this vital spiritual discipline. Even the way Paul went about it was generous. Harshly scolding people for a failure to give according to God's grace is oxymoronic. It defeats the purpose of highlighting the mercy of God.

GUIDE: Use the commentary for the verses on these verses to explain what it means to excel in everything.

Recap: Because of what Christ did—not simply in coming to earth but in dying for our sins on the cross—we came to possess a wealth beyond our comprehension. The riches we enjoy are spiritual in nature —abundant forgiveness, mercy, and hope. When God forgives us, He doesn't just forgive us a little bit. It's more than we could ever truly hope to experience.

As the enormity of Christ's grace becomes real to me, my heart is crushed. As I consider this great exchange—how Christ became poor for me so that I could become rich—I'm overwhelmed by how blessed I've become. A lifestyle of generosity then becomes my natural response.

ASK: Can you relate to this sentiment?

What truths about God encourage you to be generous?

What strategies for being generous have you learned? (some people set aside a certain amount of money to use to bless others, etc.)

RESPONSE

God's generous grace moves us to be generous. Identify one Christian who you consider to be generous. Don't simply use financial giving as an indicator but look for those who freely share their

time, their attention, or their ideas with others. Generosity in one area often extends to another. Ask the person some version of this question: “What moves you to share things in your life with others the way that you do?” Then ask the Lord to show you tangible ways you can be generous this week.

COMMENTARY

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-2

Connection to The Big Idea: Despite their hardships, the Macedonian churches were generous.

Second Corinthians is one of Paul’s four letters to the church at Corinth, only two of which remain. Paul wrote First Corinthians (the second letter) due to issues the church was having with such things as disunity (1 Cor. 3:5-17), immorality (5:1-13), food offered to idols (8:1-13), communion practices (11:17-34), and spiritual gifts (chapters 12–14). Second Corinthians (the fourth letter) was written in part to address individuals in the church who were hostile toward Paul and questioning his apostolic authority. Chapters 8–9 address the issue of a collection being made for the believers in Judea. Paul urged the Corinthians to participate in the effort.

Grace of God (v. 1). The Greek term for *grace* is a key theme of chapters 8–9, appearing ten times in those two chapters. *Grace* is the demonstration of unmerited favor toward someone—in this instance God’s unmerited favor toward people. In this context, Paul was referring to how God’s grace had motivated the Macedonian churches to extend charity to others even during their own difficult times.

The churches of Macedonia (v. 1). In the first century AD, modern Greece was divided into two regions. The northern region was Macedonia, while the coastal southern region was Achaia. Acts mentions churches in Macedonia at Philippi (Acts 16:12-40), Thessalonica (17:1-9), and Berea (vv. 10-14). In Achaia, Paul visited Athens (vv. 16-34) and established the church at Corinth (18:1-18).

Severe trial brought about by affliction (v. 2). The New Testament describes some of the trials experienced by believers in Philippi (Acts 16:20-24) and Thessalonica (17:5-9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4). *Affliction* (persecution, oppression, tribulation) led to severe *trial*, which translates a Greek term literally meaning “testing.” The word’s focus is on the positive response to such *affliction*. Such persecution could have included social and financial trials, as well as physical persecution and imprisonment for their faith. Paul viewed such things as tests of the Macedonian believers’ Christian character which had revealed the strength of their faith.

Abundant joy . . . extreme poverty (v. 2). Probably as a result of persecution, the Macedonian believers experienced *extreme poverty*. The term for *extreme* means “down to the deepest place.” The Macedonians experienced “rock bottom” poverty. But even in their poverty they experienced *abundant joy*. Christians can experience joy even in the most difficult circumstances because our joy is not focused on our external circumstances; our joy is in our relationship with Jesus—in being forgiven of our sins and brought into God’s family, and focuses on the new, eternal life we experience in part now and in full in the age to come (Matt. 5:10-12; Acts 5:41; 1 Pet. 1:3-5). God works even through our trials to spread the gospel (Phil. 1:12-20) and bring us to maturity in Christ (Jas. 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Wealth of generosity (v. 2). The Greek term translated *generosity* refers to one who has personal integrity which is demonstrated in his or her words and actions. For the Macedonian believers, it involved sincere concern, and it led to their generous giving to the Judean Christians in need (1 Cor. 16:1-4). The Macedonians, who were not wealthy in material possessions, were wealthy in their

generosity, and they displayed that through their sacrificial giving.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:3-6

Connection to The Big Idea: The Macedonian churches' generosity grew out of their commitment to the Lord.

According to their ability . . . beyond their ability (v. 3). The Macedonian believers had given all that could have been expected of them. And then by God's grace (v. 1) they had given some more! This giving came not out of their surplus but out of their limited resources (see Mark 12:41-44). Their giving was **of their own accord**. The Greek term for this phrase means voluntarily or without coercion. The word describes Titus's voluntary involvement in gathering the collection for the Judean believers—"by his own choice" (2 Cor. 8:16-17).

Privilege of sharing (v. 4). The Macedonian believers **begged** to have the privilege of giving to the collection for the Judean Christians. The Greek term for *privilege* is the same word translated "grace" (v. 1). As in the case of the Macedonian believers, giving is both through the grace of God and an opportunity and blessing. The Greek term for *sharing* refers to an association in regard to mutual interests and sharing with one another. In this context it refers to partnership and fellowship in the gospel **ministry**.

Not just as we hoped (v. 5). The Macedonian believers had given beyond what could have been expected in light of their difficult financial situation (v. 3). These words could imply that Paul and his coworkers were shocked by how much these believers contributed to the Judean relief fund.

They gave themselves (v. 5). Through their actions, the Macedonian believers gave themselves **first to the Lord**. In this context, the Greek term for *first* refers to both first in sequence and first in priority. Paul's words recognize the matter of giving to any ministry or cause is a heart matter between the believer and the Lord. Our relationship with the Lord is to always be our first priority; all our motivations and actions should flow out of our relationship with Christ and His lordship over us.

Because the Macedonians were fully committed to the Lord, they also committed themselves to the work of His apostle Paul, specifically in the collection of financial resources for famine relief for the Judean believers. Today, giving financial resources can sometimes be easier than giving ourselves and our time to the work of ministry. In our society, which is one of the wealthiest in the world, our time and presence are sometimes greater gifts than money. But all are needed.

By God's will (v. 5). Paul also recognized that the Macedonians' involvement in the collection for the Judean Christians was due to *God's will*. The acts of the Macedonian believers were both their own and at the same time ultimately God working out His will through them (Phil. 2:12-13). Paul attributed his apostleship to the will of God (2 Cor. 1:1). The Corinthians' giving was part of God's will as well.

Titus (v. 6). Later in this chapter, Paul identified Titus as "my partner and coworker" (v. 23). Paul had apparently given Titus some responsibility in the collection of the funds (vv. 16-17). Evidently, unlike the Macedonian believers, the Corinthian Christians had failed to **complete** the process of collecting funds for the Judean believers. The Greek term for *complete* means to bring something to a successful conclusion or to successfully finish something that was begun. The Corinthians apparently had lost their initial zeal for the project. Paul had sent Titus back to the church to help complete the process of gathering the funds. The Corinthians needed to follow through on their commitment to give, and Titus would facilitate the completion of the project.

Act of grace (v. 6). Giving is not just a duty or obligation. It is an *act of grace*. Just as God's grace

had been the motivation behind the Macedonian believers' giving (v. 1), so too the Corinthians' giving was to be motivated by God's grace. Giving should be a response to the gracious activity of God in our lives, first and foremost in His accomplishing our salvation through Jesus Christ. Such giving is also an act of grace extended toward others.

2 CORINTHIANS 8:7-9

Connection to The Big Idea: The Corinthians were called to excel in grace, even as Christ has been generous in His grace to us.

Excel in everything (v. 7). Paul noted that the Corinthian believers excelled in five areas, and he would suggest a sixth—giving. First, the Corinthian Christians excelled in **faith**. The Corinthians had apparently grown in their faith (their trust in God), so much so that Paul mentioned this at the beginning of the letter (1:24). The apostle had also mentioned the spiritual gift of faith (which believes and expects God to move in power) in his previous letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:9), along with other miraculous gifts such as healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, and tongues (vv. 9-10). Such gifts were present in the Corinthian church to the degree that in 1 Corinthians Paul had to deal with issues related to how the congregation had elevated particular gifts over others (chapter 12). He may have been using a bit of sarcasm in saying these believers expected the miraculous but left the mundane (such as giving) to others like the impoverished Macedonian believers.

The Corinthian church excelled in **speech**. Several of the gifts Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 12 related to speech—messages of wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:7-10). In 1 Corinthians, Paul raised the subject of gifts to deal with a problem in the church, so quite possibly in this instance he was prodding them to give by encouraging them to have the same zeal for giving as they had for these other spiritual gifts.

The Corinthians emphasized **knowledge**, so much so that Paul used the Greek term for *knowledge* sixteen times in 1 and 2 Corinthians. *Knowledge* involves spiritual insight received from the Lord as a gift. It is included in the list of spiritual gifts the apostle addressed with the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:8). Paul certainly was not disparaging such spiritual gifts. Rather, again he encouraged them to have the same zeal for giving.

Paul also commended the Corinthians for their **diligence** or zeal. The Greek term refers to a person who has an eagerness to do something and is highly motivated to get it done. Paul may have been referring to how the Corinthian believers had previously received a letter (no longer in existence) delivered by the apostle's coworker and emissary Titus and their response of repentance concerning the issues the apostle addressed in that letter (2 Cor. 7:1-16, especially v. 11).

Paul also commended the church in Corinth for their **love** for him. They excelled in loving him, even though some in the church challenged his apostolic authority (2 Cor. 10–12). Though Paul did not question their love for him, he had a measure of disappointment that they did not keep pace with the poorer churches in Macedonia in their giving. They loved the apostle, and he desired that they express that love through their giving. It has been suggested that the construction in the Greek in this verse was normally used to address a superior and that in this context Paul was expressing his desire rather than giving a command.⁵

Command (v. 8). What was implicit in the previous verse is now made explicit. Considering his encouragement for the Corinthians to resume their giving to the Judean relief collection, Paul made sure that they did not think that this was a command that came only from his apostolic authority. It was not an order from a general to a soldier or a master to a slave. That is not to say that

commanding Christians to give is wrong. But that is not the spirit in which Paul encouraged faithful giving. He desired that all giving come from the heart of a willing servant (2 Cor. 9:5) and as an act of grace (vv. 7-8).

He was rich (v. 9). Paul appealed to the gracious nature of Jesus as the apostle asked the Corinthians believers to resume their giving. He declared Jesus was *rich*. But what did he mean by that? In Philippians 2:5-11, Paul declared that the eternal Son of God humbled Himself by becoming poor in the sense of becoming a human being through the incarnation. As a servant for our sakes, He humbled Himself to the point of dying on the cross to atone for our sins (Phil. 2:6-8). The incarnation displayed the generous nature of Jesus.

Through Jesus's sacrifice, the Corinthian believers had become spiritually **rich** in Christ. They had been forgiven their sins, been reconciled to God, adopted as children of God, received eternal life, and much more!