

Sacrificial Giving

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-5

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It is good to be with you this morning! We are glad you are here, and if you are visiting with us, we invite you to fill out a visitor card online using the QR code or the address on the wall up here. We do plan on partaking of the Lord's Supper right after we study the word of God today, so if you do not yet have the elements for the Supper, this would be a great time to get those.

As our tradition has been, we are starting today with a brief summary of the good news concerning the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We obey this good news by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed with him, a burial in water, for the forgiveness of sins. And the pictures on the wall up here are from Chennai in India. This comes from Paul Renganathan, a preacher in that area. He says, "Today 21 souls put on Christ from 3 different places. People hear about the living water and looking for water to be baptized. Because of water scarcity, baptism in water drums. Living water plenty. Baptismal water shortage." We've seen barrel baptisms before, we've seen some unique baptisteries. But one thing I noticed is that Paul, the preacher, is barefoot (you can see that in the picture on the lower right up here). I don't know if that's because he doesn't own shoes or whether he is expecting the overflow (as you can see in the lower left). Either way, we are thankful for the good work that's being done in India. I have heard that India now has more congregations than we have here in the United States. The future of the Lord's church looks bright in the second most populated nation in the world (with a population of more than 1.3 billion, right behind China at 1.4 billion).

Beyond the baptisms, I'd like to share some good news of another variety this morning, and really, we have some blending of good news today. Just a few days ago, the Christian Chronicle published a story with the headline, "A frantic trip to the grocery store – and a baptism." They report on a church in Romania, one of the closest congregations to Ukraine without actually being in Ukraine (just across the border), and they explain that their church of 20 members has turned its facility into a relief center for Ukrainian refugees. They are housing Ukrainians in their building, and they also now operate a free grocery store in a rented facility next door. They explain that their baptistery is full of vegetables. This is the picture in the upper left. Their baptistery is the produce section! The picture at the top right is of a Ukrainian mom and her son doing some free "shopping" in the resource center, and the picture at the bottom is of their minister purchasing eggs. He makes daily trips to the supermarket to buy huge crates of cabbage, and eggs, and other supplies. The refugees take turns mopping the floors, cooking meals, and serving as translators. The article says that in addition to providing

food, their members give English lessons using the Bible. And because of this, several days ago, they had to clear the vegetables out of the baptistery for a baptism. One of the refugees had been studying, she asked to put on Christ in baptism, and when they asked her why, she said, "I've been around you. I see how you treat people." That is awesome!

And before we move on from this, I would share a map of where this is happening. I've put the big red arrow pointing to the church in Romania, I've circled the label for Ukraine in the upper right. But then, in the map that was linked in the Christian Chronicle article, I also noticed a few interesting references down at the bottom of the map, and these will ultimately be relevant in our study of God's word today. Notice, on the map linked to this article, we can see "Northern Macedonia," and we can also see the city of Thessaloniki (or ancient Thessalonica). Let's just keep this in mind, and we will get back to this in a moment.

The other good news is also tied to the situation in Ukraine, the Christian Chronicle just posted an article with the headline, "A joyful task in a time of madness." This also comes from Romania, where they start by explaining that there is a Singer sewing machine in the middle of the church auditorium, with the tables and chairs filled with quilts that were handmade by a Christian sister, Elena Dinca. She says, "For me it is a joy to do the work," and she says that the quilts go to Ukrainian refugees that are flowing into Romania. I want us to remember what she says about this being a "joy." This will also tie into our study this morning. The church is hosting a refugee family in their facility, and one of the other Christian sisters there translates Bible commentaries into the Romanian language.

And then, in terms of service, we also have an update from Churches of Christ Disaster Relief, based out of Nashville. We have shared their work before, some of us have donated to this group personally, and I believe my uncle Micah (who is with us this morning) has also done some work in their warehouse down in Nashville. I have toured their facility many years ago, but the concept is that they are always ready to go with supplies for disaster areas. They beat FEMA into New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. They called us after the tornado in Stoughton a number of years ago. They see a disaster coming, they load up with exactly what is needed, and they have a volunteer truck driver with his foot on the clutch, just waiting to head out to distribute supplies through local congregations, so that the Lord gets the credit. And one caught my eye last month, and I've saved it for today. This goes back to the wildfires in Texas back on Friday, March 18. Hundreds were evacuated, 45,000 acres burned. They got a call from the church in Gorman, Texas, on Friday morning, and the semi pulled out at 1:45 that afternoon, full of food, water, new clothing, shoes and undergarments, personal hygiene, infant care, and cleaning supplies. The church in Gorman then posted to the community and said, "We have water, assorted food boxes, toiletries, clothing, and bedding behind our auditorium in our fellowship hall for those affected by the fires. We also have trash bags, shovels, rakes, gloves, and cleaning supplies. Please, come and take as much as you need!" And I love this: They say, "**We will not run out.**" [there are no supply chain issues with the Lord's church]. "We also would like to keep in contact with families in order to help with reestablishing household items at later dates. This would include items such as kitchen supplies and furniture." They close by saying, "The love of our Lord Jesus Christ has been seen through you all! God bless you all!" That, also, is just awesome! God's people truly know how to help in difficult circumstances.

This morning, I'd like for us to study a question that came in from one of our viewers on YouTube. They've been joining us online since the beginning of the pandemic, and the man was wondering about something, and so he asked for a lesson on this question: Do we really give sacrificially? And it is an interesting question, for several reasons. First of all, very rarely will anybody ever ask for a lesson on giving! So, just asking the question, I believe, shows a tremendous level of spiritual maturity, just to be concerned about this. But secondly, the question is

also interesting, because “it depends.” It depends, doesn’t it? The quick and simple answer to this question, I suppose, is: I don’t know! In terms of giving, I know what I am doing, but I do not know what you are doing. From time to time, the door will crack open a bit, and I get a glimpse of sacrificial giving. Sometimes I will see families or individuals do without so that they are able to help others. So much of that I cannot share, so as not to break a confidence, but there are examples that shine through from time to time. One member may help another with a home repair. Someone may sacrifice to help with some project here at our facility. I think of the ramp out front. One of our people saw the need and knew it would be an expensive project, so he came to the elders and said, “Would \$12,000 help?” Why, yes it would! Others gave as well, and we were able to accomplish that project rather quickly. We could go on and on like this, but I’d like for us to think about this very good question by looking at an example in scripture, because there were a group of churches described by the apostle Paul as giving **“beyond what they were able.”** And to me, that is the definition of “sacrificial giving.”

And really, we might be surprised at the number of examples like this – especially considering how we often think that giving should be completely private. But we know that examples have a way of motivating us. I think of the old farmer who found an ostrich egg and brought it into the hen house and said, “Alright ladies, I’m not being critical, but I thought you should know what the others are doing!” In maybe the same way, God uses examples, including the poor widow in Luke 21, or the woman with the vial of perfume in Mark 14, or Zaccheus in Luke 19, or Barnabas donating proceeds from the sale of his land in Acts 4. This morning, though, in terms of sacrificial giving, I’d like for us to study Paul’s message to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 8 (p. 1811).

Paul passes through Macedonia (that is, northern Greece) and establishes the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica on his Second Missionary Journey. He also establishes the church in Corinth on that journey. And then he passes through that area again on his Third Missionary Journey, where he spends three years in Ephesus. In Ephesus, he writes a series of letters back to the church in Corinth. Meanwhile, there is a terrible famine back in Jerusalem, and Paul is collecting funds from these new Gentile congregations to take back to Jerusalem. We find the first reference to this collection back in 1 Corinthians 16, where he tells them to prepare for his visit by establishing a weekly collection. They are to collect these funds on a weekly basis, **“so that no collections be made when I come.”** Well, based on this first letter, it seems that Corinth had promised to help in a big way, but they were starting to waver a bit. Paul, then, writes the letter we know as 2 Corinthians to encourage them to follow through on their original promise. In 2 Corinthians 8, he starts, though, by referring to these churches up north in Macedonia. And while we have the map up here, let’s remember that this area was on the map of Romania that we looked at earlier. The church with a baptistry full of vegetables is not too far north of here, as is the church making quilts. I’m just reminding us that Macedonia is just south of modern-day Romania (and ultimately, Ukraine). Well, back in the mid-50’s AD, the people of Macedonia were living in extreme poverty. Not only had their economy been decimated by Roman taxes, but they had also experienced a number of earthquakes, and on top of all of this, the Christians in particular were being persecuted. We think of Paul’s first visit to Philippi, when he and Silas were beaten and thrown in prison. We think of the riot in Thessalonica, where the authorities demanded a financial pledge from Jason, that they wouldn’t cause any more trouble. Things are tense in that area. As we will see in just a moment, though, Paul writes to Corinth and uses the Christians in Macedonia as an example of sacrificial giving.

So, as we study this question, let’s look together this morning at 2 Corinthians 8:1-5,

¹ Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, ² that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. ³ For I testify that according to their

ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, ⁴ begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, ⁵ and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

As we allow ourselves to be challenged by this passage, and as we study the question that has been asked, I'd like to make a few observations based on what Paul says here.

I. And as we begin, we start where Paul starts, with the emphasis on the fact that THIS GIVING DONE BY THE MACEDONIANS IS MOTIVATED BY THE GRACE OF GOD.

They give, not necessarily because they are good people, not primarily because they see a need, not to meet a goal, not just so they could feel good about it, not as a command (in fact, down in verse 8, Paul specifically says that ***"I am NOT speaking this as a command,"*** but instead, here in verse 1 we find that the Macedonians are giving because they have experienced the grace of God. There's another verse that isn't in this paragraph, it comes a bit later, but most of you know my favorite verse in the whole Bible is 2 Corinthians 8:9, where Paul says, ***"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."*** That's grace! Jesus was rich, he had absolutely everything he ever could have wanted, but he saw that we were spiritually poor, so he gave up the riches of heaven and chose to be born into poverty, so that we, through his poverty, might become rich. This is grace! This is God's gift to us, and in response, we turn around and give to others, ***"We love, because he first loved us"*** (1 John 4:19).

We think of the first evidence that Zaccheus had turned a corner in his life. This wealthy unscrupulous tax collector meets Jesus, and after they talk a bit, Zaccheus says, ***"Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much"*** (Luke 19:8). After experiencing the grace of God, Zaccheus gives. Perhaps in a similar way, the Macedonians obey the gospel, and they open their hearts. We think of Lydia. Isn't that what she did, by forcing Paul and Silas to stay in her house? She's baptized, and suddenly: What is mine is now yours! The Christians in Macedonia had been given the grace of God. Obviously, this isn't a reference to wealth, but it's a reference to their own salvation. And this grace is what motivates their giving.

So, first of all, as we study the idea of sacrificial giving, we start where Paul starts, with the grace of God. The word ***"grace,"*** by the way, is found at least seven times in this chapter on giving. So, before we even get to the idea of giving sacrificially, we start by realizing what we have been given. We have been given the grace of God. We have been given the gift of salvation. Our sins have been forgiven. Giving starts with grace.

II. The second big idea here is that in their giving, the Macedonians were JOYFUL, IN SPITE OF THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES (verse 2).

In verse 2, Paul refers to the fact ***"that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality."*** So, we have a contrast here. And it almost doesn't make sense, does it? On one hand, these people are destitute. They are living in ***"deep poverty."*** They are enduring this ***"great ordeal of affliction."*** And yet, at the same time, their ***"abundance of joy...overflowed in the wealth of their liberality."*** In fact, we have several references to the churches of Macedonia (especially Philippi) supplying Paul's needs on a regular basis. These people are dirt poor, but they are helping (over and over again). So, instead of asking to be excused from this collection, instead the "poor me" attitude, instead of saying, "Hey,

we have enough trouble of our own up here,” these people are joyfully sharing, despite their circumstances. And really, this goes back to the beginning of the church in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7, Paul wrote these people for the first time, right after he got run out of town himself, and he said, **“You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.”** So, even from the beginning, the new Christians in Thessalonica 1.) suffered, but 2.) they were also full of joy, and this combination served as an example to others, just as it also does here in 2 Corinthians.

By the way, the word translated **“liberality”** or **“generosity”** (at the end of verse 2) seems to go back to the idea of single-mindedness. And to understand single-mindedness in the realm of giving, maybe could think about the opposite, the idea of duplicity, the idea of being double-minded, saying one thing but doing another, making excuses. The Macedonians, though, were single-minded, **“God has been good to us; therefore, we want to help!”** They weren’t giving excuses, but they were giving joyfully, despite their circumstances.

Many of us know from experience that needs and opportunities don’t always wait for ideal conditions. I think of renting an elementary school library for worship and then finding this building and putting an offer in on it the weekend before what would come to be known as 9-11. Here we are, stepping out in faith, doing something beyond our ability, and suddenly we experience this atrocity as a nation, the economy seems to pause for several months, and then we go to war. And here we are as a small congregation, **“Hey, let’s try to purchase our first church building!”** Meanwhile, everything we owned as a church fit on cart that we rolled into a storage closet at the school each week (including this podium and a bunch of old song books). But, as you know, many were willing to give joyfully, despite some challenging circumstances back then. We came up with half of the purchase price by the time of the closing and paid off the rest over the next eleven months. What a blessing! Joy was a motivator. We were thrilled to finally have a place of our own, a place for Bible classes, a place to get together. Giving certainly wasn’t a burden, it was a joy. I think of God’s people (under the leadership of King David) taking up a collection to construct the temple. In 1 Chronicles 29, we find that the people **“offered willingly”** and gave literally tons of gold, and silver, and iron and other materials, and the text says (in verse 9) that **“...the people rejoiced because they had offered so willingly, for they made their offering to the LORD with a whole heart** [remember the idea of being single-minded], **and King David also rejoiced greatly.”** They gave with joy. And that is what we see here – sacrificial giving, motivated by grace and joy.

III. **This leads us to verse 3, where we find that the Macedonians gave NOT JUST ACCORDING TO THEIR ABILITY, BUT EVEN BEYOND THEIR ABILITY.**

And this is where we ask: What in the world does that mean? How do we give **“beyond our ability”**? How do we give more than 100%? I refilled my vitamins yesterday and noticed that I’m taking 1,111% of my daily allowance of Vitamin C. Is this what it means to give **“beyond our ability”**? Are we somehow able to give more than we actually have? Maybe. I saw a meme this week that had two questions, 1.) Could Peter walk on water? No. 2.) Did Peter walk on water? Yes. In a sense, Peter did (with God’s help) what he was truly unable to do (on his own). So maybe that’s part of it. But even beyond the Macedonians, it seems we have an example of this kind of giving in Mark 12:41-43, where we find that Jesus,

...sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

She wasn't really ***"able"*** to give what she gave, was she? In my mind, that widow gave ***"beyond her ability."*** She gave sacrificially. Those who were rich failed to truly sacrifice, but this woman felt it. This woman gave up something. We think of those sacrifices demanded by the Law of Moses, and I sometimes wonder: How would it affect my family finances if I had to offer a goat every time I sinned? I don't even know where to get a goat, but I'm guessing goats are pretty expensive! But that's why they call it a ***"sacrifice"*** – sacrificial giving is when we give up one thing so that we can afford another thing. We sacrifice.

So what does this look like for us? When I give ***"according to my ability,"*** I look at my salary, I make a budget, and my giving is a certain percentage of that budget. Right? This is a fairly simple concept. But how do I give ***"beyond my ability"***? My understanding is that since I cannot give more than 100% of what I have, this means that something else must go, a sacrifice. So, we are not giving out of our ***"abundance"*** (like the rich men in the temple were doing), but we are giving beyond what many would consider to be responsible. I've heard from some of you through the years when your tax guy looks at your giving and he says, "Really? Are you sure this figure is accurate? This seems rather excessive. How are you able to do this?" When you cause your accountant to question your giving, that right there is giving ***"beyond your ability."*** This is what the Macedonians were doing. They were not printing money, but they were giving sacrificially. They were cutting one thing to afford another thing – in this case, the weekly collection. And in their case (as one author has suggested), we doubt they were substituting hot dogs for rib-eyes, they weren't swapping white bread for hamburger buns, but they were most likely going without. These people were truly sacrificing for brothers and sisters hundreds of miles away whom they had never met.

To sacrifice is to give up, to do without. In our family, we sometimes refer to our "decision not to afford cable television." I'm not cutting on cable in general, but I'm using this as an example. There are certain things we choose not to afford, and we make this choice because we have other priorities in life right now. If you come to our home right now, you will see that we have decided not to afford new carpet! We need new carpet, but we have decided not to afford it right now. And this seems to be what the Macedonians were doing, allowing them to give ***"beyond what they were able."*** We adjust our living to our giving, instead of adjusting our giving to our living. This is what it means to give sacrificially. The question that led to today's lesson is: Are we really giving sacrificially? Well, again, it depends. I don't know what you are giving, and I don't know what you might be giving up. But this is a question all of us need to answer personally. These people were giving beyond their ability.

IV. The fourth big idea here is that the Macedonians GAVE BOTH FREELY AND EAGERLY.

Right there spanning verses 3-4, Paul says that the Macedonians ***"...gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor"*** of being able to give in this way. So, their giving was ***"of their own accord,"*** and they were ***"begging"*** for the opportunity. Often, the religious world gets this backwards. We look around, and we see all kinds of bizarre ways churches have of making money – I've had one church send me a bill – but we also see churches having car washes, bake sales, dinner cruises, raffles, the church down the street from ours in the Chicago area had a beer garden every year. The Macedonians, though, didn't have to be tricked or guilted into this. We don't have competing fundraising thermometers between the Corinthians and the Macedonians. No pressure. No manipulation. No arm-twisting. Just God's people giving both freely and eagerly, begging for the opportunity. We get regular calls on the church line, from people selling various methods of fundraising. When

I decline, they often ask, "But how do you pay the bills?" "We give on the first day of the week as the Bible tells us to do." "Oh." We give freely and eagerly. One chapter later, in 2 Corinthians 9:7, Paul will go on to say that **"Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."** This is what we see here – no compulsion, not giving out of some sense of burdensome obligation, but they were giving cheerfully, even begging for the opportunity. We think back to the construction of the tabernacle when the Israelites first came out of slavery in Egypt. Moses accepted contributions, and Exodus 26 says that

...they still continued bringing to him freewill offerings every morning. And all the skillful men who were performing all the work of the sanctuary came, each from the work which he was performing, and they said to Moses, "The people are bringing much more than enough for the construction work which the LORD commanded us to perform." So Moses issued a command, and a proclamation was circulated throughout the camp, saying, "Let no man or woman any longer perform work for the contributions of the sanctuary." Thus the people were restrained from bringing any more. For the material they had was sufficient and more than enough for all the work, to perform it.

The people were so happy to be building the tabernacle that Moses had to issue a command: No more contributions! Stop donating your gold! We have too much! Earlier, I mentioned collecting funds for this building. We were receiving support from others to help cover my salary at the time. But through the years, all of you took on more and more of that responsibility, until those funds were no longer needed. I remember calling the elders down in Goodlettsville, Tennessee, and asking, "Can you please stop sending money?" They said, "What? Nobody has ever asked that before!" That was an awesome call to make. I have one cousin who insists on still sending a check each month. I've told him, "We are okay, but if you insist, we will put this aside for a larger building at some point," and he has continued. But the point is: These people were giving freely and eagerly.

V. The next big idea is that these people were begging specifically for THE FAVOR OF PARTICIPATION IN THE SUPPORT OF THE SAINTS.

This word we have here as **"participation"** is a word often translated as **"fellowship"** or **"sharing."** By giving, they knew they were participating in the lives of their brothers and sisters in a far-off place. They were sharing a burden. We normally do a better job sacrificing for those we love. So let's think about it this way: We need to get to know each other better, don't we? If I know what you are going through, I might be more willing to give beyond what I am able. If I don't know, then I see no need. We need to get to know each other! Or we might think about it in this way: Who did we buy presents for over the past year? I gave things to my wife, and children, and parents, and my sister. Why? Because I love these people! And this seems to have something to do with these people from Macedonia. They are begging for the **"favor of participation in the support of the saints."** They are really wanting to take care of their Christian family. Out of all the places they could have sent an offering, they started with the **"household of the faith"** (as Paul commands in Galatians 6:10).

VI. There's one last big idea to consider in this passage, and it comes in the fact that the Macedonians GAVE THEMSELVES FIRST TO THE LORD (verse 5).

They gave, **"not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God."** We have the two greatest commandments here, don't we? Love God, and love others. But they gave themselves

to God first, “Lord, here I am! I am yours. Use me in any way you see fit. My life, my talents, all of my resources, everything is yours.” We think of what Paul said in Romans 12:1, **“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”** We give ourselves first to the Lord. And this might be where we realize that not all giving is financial. Sometimes we give by doing. I might not be able to pay somebody \$300 a month to shovel the snow out here, but maybe I can sign up for a month or two. The same goes for cleaning, and so on. When the church in Freeport, Illinois, learned we had found a building, they explained that they didn’t have funds to help, but they did have ten men who were really good at putting roofs on, “How’s your roof?” “It’s bad.” “Order the shingles, and we will be up there in two weeks.” They gave themselves. And then, I’m also thinking about the clothing give-away coming up in August. We will have more information on this in the very near future. But many years ago, realizing that we had more people-power than financial might, one of the women of the congregation started coordinating the give-away, where we collect and sort clothing from the community and then turn around and give it away on the second Saturday in August. It’s coming! We need to sort from now through August (if you can sort, you are needed), we’ll need to coordinate some crafts for the kids, we’ll need to work on setting up and taking down. There’s something for everybody. But this is one more example of giving ourselves first.

Conclusion:

And this brings us to the end of our study today. Are we really giving sacrificially? A good follow-up question might be: Are we giving like the Macedonians? Paul holds these people up as an example: 1.) They were motivated by the grace of God, not guilt. 2.) They were joyful despite some very difficult circumstances. 3.) They gave according to and even beyond their ability. 4.) They gave freely and eagerly. 5.) They gave to participate in the lives of their fellow saints. But even before all of this, 6.) they gave themselves to the Lord.

I’m thankful for your time and attention today, and I am thankful for our viewer who had a very good question.

As we close, and before we prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Supper, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for the joy and privilege of giving sacrificially. We are thankful for your grace and mercy. We are so thankful that you gave your only Son. And today, we are especially thankful for the example of those saints in Macedonia so many years ago. Open our eyes to the needs all around us, for we know that it is truly more blessed to give than to receive.

We are thankful for the good news concerning John’s cancer. We are also thinking of those we love who continue to struggle with health concerns of all kinds – be with Abe, and Ruby, and Carson, and Denesha’s brother Kenny, and be with my dad as well. All of us seem to be living with constant reminders that this earth is not our home. Be merciful to us.

We love you, Father, and we come to you this morning in the name of Jesus, the Great Physician.
AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com