The Grace of Giving
2 Cor 8:1-15

Christmas and New Year are over, and so we're back in 2 Corinthians. And this week and next we're looking at chapters 8 and 9 where Paul tackles the issue of giving and generosity, of money and how we use it.

And that's always a bit delicate, isn't it? Being English, I was brought up to believe that there are some things that polite people never talk about - one of which was money.

But the Bible is surprisingly impolite and un-english, because it has no hesitation about talking about money. It says stuff like 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil' (1 Tim 6:10). Which means that underneath some of the questionable decisions we make in life, or the discontent we feel, or the arguments we get into, is the fact that we want what money offers just that bit too much.

Plus, Jesus talks of 'the deceitfulness of riches' - that money promises you stuff it can never deliver. And in the Parable of the Sower Jesus says that fact has the power to strangle the spiritual life out of you. And then again he asks, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?" Meaning, you can have everything money can buy, and yet, ultimately, have nothing.

So money, and how we handle it, is of more than academic interest, isn't it? According to Jesus, anyone who's thoughtful about their spiritual health is going to be thoughtful about money.

Which means, the stuff Paul covers here is stuff we all need to hear. Especially, if you're English.

The Beauty of Generosity
Look at v1, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.'

Now, examples can be powerful motivators, can't they? For good or bad. Maybe you've had a boss and you think, 'I do *not* want to be like him.' Or you've had a teacher or a coach and you look at the positive impact they have had and you think, 'I *do* want to be like them.'

And to these Christians in Corinth Paul is giving the Christians up in Macedonia, in Thessalonica and Philippi, as examples of people who had given sacrificially.

One of my favourite Christmas books is *A Christmas Carol*, where Dickens describes Scrooge, the main character as 'A tight-fisted hand at the grindstone… A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had struck out generous fire.' And every time I read those words I think, 'God, don't let me be like Scrooge.'

But these Macedonians were different. And Paul sees in their generosity something beautiful, something exemplary. Verse 2, 'For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.'

Now, some chemical reactions are just dramatic, aren't they. I remember at school being spell-bound as Mr Forrest, my chemistry teacher, would take a flask of something and pour it into a flask of something else and clouds of gas and bubbling liquid would pour over.

But in Macedonia, the setting wasn't a chemistry lab, it was severe affliction and extreme poverty Paul says, because most likely they were shut out of trade and commerce because of

their faith in Jesus. But take that persecution and material, financial poverty that came with it, and add to it the joy of knowing you are loved by God and your life is in his hands, and pour that gospel joy into that severe affliction and 'a wealth of generosity' overflowed Paul says.

And see how they gave, v3: 'They gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord.'

And when you see someone facing seemingly insurmountable odds, with everything stacked against them, and you watch them rise to that challenge, and overcome, in life, or sport, or war, there's something inspiring about it. And these Christians were suffering intensely, I mean they had little enough for themselves, and yet here they are raising funds to support their suffering brothers and sisters in Jerusalem - people they've never even met. Because that's where this offering is going to: v4, for 'the relief of the saints.'

Now, how do you explain that? How do you explain people who have virtually nothing giving away what little excess they had?

Well, when life is going well, and you're working hard, and seeing the results of that, and you're prospering, it's easy to look down on others for whom that's not happening, isn't it. 'If they just worked harder, like me, or used their money more wisely, like me, they wouldn't be in that position.' But when like these Macedonians you're under pressure, and everyday you face the struggle of getting through the day, you know you're not self-made. You know you're dependent on God and your life is in his hands. And that makes you much more compassionate to others who are also under pressure. So these suffering Christians in Macedonia, v4, were '*begging us earnestly for the favour* of taking part in the relief of the saints.'

And when Paul let them, they gave according to their means and even beyond their means, he says.

Imagine if we were to do that. Imagine if all of us considered it an honour to give and as a church we gave according to *our* means. And what if like these Macedonians we were to give *above* our means? Think of the gospel spreading in word and deed we could support here and away from here. Think of the ministry and acts of service that could be multiplied. And our deficit would be wiped out. And our building project would become a reality. And we'd probably be able to fund a staff position that increased our outreach - to students, or kids, or women, or music.

And yet, while generosity in others is is inspiring, the truth is we can struggle to see it bubble over in our lives, can't we? We admire it when we see it in others and yet it can have a hard time getting established in our own lives. Why?

The Barriers to Generosity

And Paul is telling all this to the Corinthians because he wants them to emulate the Macedonians. And a year ago, they'd started well. Verses 10-11, 'This benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. So now finish doing it as well.'

And whether it's a DIY project, or writing up a paper, or running a race, it's great to start something, isn't it, but it's even better to finish it. And Paul is saying, it's the same with giving and generosity. It's good to have the desire to give, but it's even better to do it. And down in Corinth, they'd started to get a collection together for the suffering church in Jerusalem, but then it had stalled.

And the question is, why? Well, Paul gives us some clues. Firstly, maybe they just never quite got round to it. I mean, Corinth was this happening place, and when life is full and busy, you know how it is: weeks and months can pass. And you meant to get round to making that bank transfer but it never quite made it to the top of the to-do list.

But then look at v11-12. Paul wants them to contribute 'out of what you have. For if the readiness is there it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.'

And while the Christians in Macedonia were poor, the city of Corinth was incredibly rich and, socially, money and wealth were seen as markers of reputation. And people would make large and public donations to fund civic works as a way of enhancing their reputation. Because if you can give *that* much you really *must* be something.

And that was the cultural sea the Christians in Corinth were swimming in. What effect would it have had on them? Well, what if, by Corinthian standards, you didn't have that much to give? What if financially things were not so great for you at the moment? Then you'd likely think, I won't give anything because to give something small and unimpressive would reflect badly on me.

Now, you and I are unlikely to think like that in terms of our reputation, but we might in terms of a gift's worth. That my contribution is going to be so small it won't materially affect things, so there's no point in my giving at all. And Paul is saying, 'no - it's not the absolute value of your gift that matters, it's the readiness with which you give it. We give according to what we have, not what we don't have. That's what God's looking at. That's what makes it valuable.' And besides, more than once, Jesus proved himself capable of taking seemingly inadequate offerings and multiplying them.

But the second effect this cultural sea they were swimming in would have affected them is the desire to hold on. Because if spending power gave you prestige, and enabled you to hold your head up and feel good about yourself, why would you give it away? And in a society without a safety net, why would you risk your future security by giving that security away - especially for people you've never met and can offer you nothing in return?

Well, look what Paul writes in v8: 'I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love *also* is genuine.' You see, the Macedonians giving so generously said something about what they loved most, didn't it? And it wasn't their money. It wasn't their reputation in their eyes of the world. It wasn't their financial security. But these Corinthians have stalled on their giving because, most likely, what money offers them has too high a place in their order of loves.

Think how that can work for us. Like them we can see money as our security. We feel better about the future if we know there's money in the bank or the pension fund is growing. And money *does* give us a measure of security. It is what pays the bills. But it's not our ultimate security, and so it shouldn't be our ultimate love.

But also, like them, money, and what it can buy, can make us feel better about ourselves. It's what funds the next great holiday or experience. And life is short and we want to get out of it everything we can. Because our friends have the latest gadget, or visited that place or taken that holiday, and we feel the comparison. And Paul is saying, 'yes, but how we use our money

has this way of revealing what we love most - is it God and his work and other people - or is it our security or comfort or enjoyment and how we compare to others?'

And Paul wants them to look again at the order of their loves. Verse 7, 'But as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you - see that you excel in this act of grace also.'

So, there are all these areas in which these Corinthians are good - and not just good, excellent. Their level of faith, their preaching and teaching, their passion. And Paul is saying, the fact that you excel in all these areas means there's absolutely no reason why you can't also excel in this area. In fact, you can!

Now, again, think about us. Think about how you excel in any number of areas. How at work, or at home, or in your studies, you apply yourself, you overcome obstacles, you find solutions, you succeed, you lead, and Paul is saying that tells you, you can do all of those things in this area of generosity as well.

The question is, how do you get there? How do you see a love for God and his work and a love for others rising in your order of loves and outpacing the desire for security, comfort, enjoyment or reputation?

The Grace of Generosity

Just Look at what it was about the Macedonians that so surprised Paul. They begged to take part and, v5, 'this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.'

So, before making any bank transfers they first gave themselves to Christ as Lord. And that's what can profoundly influence what we do with our money, even, especially, when it's scarce. Because when he has our hearts, when we've settled it - as individuals, or if you're married as a couple, or with your kids as a family, and you've agreed: he's the one you're going to serve, then he'll also have our resources. Because when he captures our hearts everything else, including our money, follows. As one commentator puts it: it's always Lordship then stewardship. Because something, someone, some controlling narrative, some world-view, some sense of what makes the good life, is going to be your Lord, isn't it. Something is going to determine how you use your money.

And for the Macedonians it was Christ. And their generosity was simply an overflow of their commitment to him. It's the hallmark of authentic Christianity.

I mean, how do you know that some article of gold or silver is the real deal? You look for those little imprints, those hallmarks, that tell you, this is it. And radical, sacrificial giving of yourself to the Lord and then to others, are the hallmarks of genuine Christianity, that tell you, this is it. Not, does this work for me? Is this convenient for me? But the heart-felt, responded to call to give yourself away for Christ and for others because he's your Lord.

But why would you want to do that? Why want to give up control of your life and your money to him?

Because he gave up everything for you. Because while the Macedonians are great examples, the supreme example is Christ himself. Verse 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 by his poverty might become rich.'

You see, the Macedonians are inspirational because they were poor but gave. But Christ was rich, rich beyond all imagining; and talk of reputation, he was the focus of heaven's adoration, the one before whom angels who we would quake before, bowed down in worship; and he dwelt in unassailable, total security, but he gave it all up, to become a man, to be despised and rejected and crucified.

For what? For you. And he did it when we could offer him nothing, when we were spiritually in the gutter. And he became poor - not just the poverty of the stable, or the life of a manual labourer, but the crushing poverty of the cross, as first his friends and then even his Heavenly Father turned away from him, as he bore our poverty upon himself.

And he did it to make you rich. So you can know you are loved by God, that all your sins are forgiven, that he delights in you, and smiles and sings over you. That he works all the circumstances of your life - even the hard times - for your good. That we are utterly secure in him.

And it's out of that richness that we have in Christ that we can give. It's why Paul keeps coming back to *grace* throughout this passage: v1, 'We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.' They were, v4, 'begging us earnestly for the favour [the grace] of taking part in the relief of the saints.' Verse 7, 'As you excel in everything… excel in this act of grace also.' Verse 9, 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Because when you have been on the receiving end of God's grace to you, grace begins to take a hold of your heart.

And you welcome others, because he welcomed you. You forgive, because he forgave you. You love, because he first loved you. And you give, because he gave everything for you. And you know what Christ, the only One's whose opinion really counts, thinks of you, so you don't need to bolster your reputation or how you compare with others by how you use your money. And you know that the life to come will be be infinitely better than this life, and free of charge, so you don't need to let the fear of missing out, and the need to squeeze every drop out of this life control you.

But it also answers why you might want to hold on to money for your security. Look at v15. Paul is quoting Exodus and the account of God providing manna in the desert: 'As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over and whoever gathered little had no lack."' And the manna was proof to the people of Israel: even in the desert God will take care of you. And if they tried to hoard it, out of fear God wouldn't keep his word, it just rotted. But as they trusted him to provide their daily bread, everyone had enough. And then Jesus came and said, 'I'm the bread of life' I'm the true manna. I'm the one who can satisfy your deepest needs. So trust me, find your security in me and know I will never let you down.' And as you do, you'll find the freedom to use your resources to meet the needs of others, and discover his supply never fails.

So at the start of this year, let the grace of Christ sink in and may all of us to excel in the grace of giving.