

***When God Gives Grace To A Church***  
***II Corinthians 8: 1 – 7***

***INTRODUCTION***

Two of our churches have been in the news in recent days. The First Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia, made the news with a most unusual experience. A vital piece of property became available to the church for purchase. They needed the property for future expansion and parking. It was the property of a Cadillac dealership in the community and the cost was to be almost three million dollars. The pastor presented the need to the church, and they accepted the challenge. On the day that the closing was to be made on the property, the offering was consummated. They found that the people had given more than enough to pay cash for the property. Their church is approximately the same as ours in attendance.

The other church is the First Baptist Church of Houston. Their pastor challenged their people to double their tithes for two years so that they might build a new building muchly needed for expansion so that they might avoid going into debt. This would involve giving over five million dollars per year above their budget needs. A million dollars of the over and above would be designated for missions. Last Sunday they over-pledged such a challenge. How do you explain such generosity on the part of these churches? Our text provides us with an explanation. The grace of God is at work in their fellowship.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about an offering for the poor believers in Jerusalem. All of the Gentile churches are making such an offering. The Corinthian church has been responding rather slowly to the challenge. In seeking to motivate them to action, the Apostle holds up before them the example of the churches in Macedonia. These would be Thessalonica, Philippi, and Berea. These churches had made a remarkable response to the offering. Paul points us to the "grace that God has given" to the fellowship. It is the grace of God that makes the difference in the church. By grace he means the influence of the Holy Spirit. As the indwelling presence of God, the Holy Spirit influences, motivates, guides, and enables the church. The churches of Macedonia had given to Him freedom to do His work among them.

What happens when God gives grace to a church? Consider with me some of the things that happened to the churches of Macedonia. They are recorded for our encouragement.

***I. THE CHURCH GIVES GENEROUSLY.***

The generosity could not be explained by their circumstances. The Macedonian Christians were in every difficult circumstances. The heavy hand of persecution had begun to fall upon the Christians in that area. The work had been born in persecution, and had never escaped. It is well to remember that the first Macedonian church to be established involved Paul and Silas being beaten and imprisoned in Philippi. The pressure had continued on them. Such persecution

always effects the ability of those involved to make a living. A persecuted people never accumulate much of this world's wealth.

Furthermore, the whole area of Macedonia seems to have been in the grips of economic depression. Paul speaks of the "extreme poverty" of those involved. If you were starting a fund raising campaign, you would not want to begin in an area like Macedonia. But in spite of all these difficulties, still they were knowing an abounding joy by the grace of God. Difficulties does not destroy the joy of Christians ..... only deepens it. These difficulties and the joy resulted in an overflow of generosity. "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity."

The word Paul uses that is translated, "rich generosity" is an interesting word. Literally the word means "single-hearted." It means to give with unmixed motives, or with a single heart. However, in this context it indicates that they were very liberal in their giving. Paul indicates this is his testimony, "For I testify that they give us much as they were able, and even beyond their ability." If they had given only according to their ability, it would not have been much. But the grace of God prompted them to go beyond their ability. They followed the example of the widow that Jesus commended who put in the treasury all that she had. They felt the Holy Spirit prompting them to give beyond what they could afford, so they did it in joyful obedience to Him.

Do we need to know more of the grace of God in our fellowship? It has been sometime since we have had a real overflow of generosity on the part of our people. We have been coming behind in this grace of giving.

## ***II. THE CHURCH GIVES VOLUNTARILY***

This is another sure evidence of the grace of God in the life of a church. In Macedonia it was made clear that the grace of God was being poured out on them. "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. Paul did not have to make an appeal to them for their offering, they made the appeal to him. Evidently there was some reluctance on the part of Paul to allow them to share in the offering. I can sympathize with Paul. Some of the most generous people I have known are those that I felt could not afford it. More than one time I have been tempted to quench their generosity, but I dare not. I must not hinder what God is doing in their lives. Their experience of giving will do them more good than any goods that the money might purchase if they were to keep it. Paul indicates that "they urgently pleaded". They sincerely wanted to be a part.

The King James Version indicates that they urgently pleaded "that we would receive the gift". "Gift" is literally "the grace". They saw the opportunity to participate in the offering as a grace gift itself, or as a privilege from the Lord. This is what the pace of God does when it is allowed to work in the heart of a church. The offering ceases to be a burden and becomes a blessing.

Furthermore, we read, "and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints." "Fellowship" is that beautiful New Testament word that suggests partnership, sharing, communion. They wanted a part of the action, they wanted to share in what God was doing for the poor believers in Jerusalem. They would be hurt if they could not participate. Also, they saw it as a ministry. Giving to them was a way of service. This is the reason that they so readily volunteered to be a participant in the offering.

This kind of grace was on the church in Jerusalem in those days immediately after Pentecost. Businessmen sold their property and brought the proceeds to lay them at the feet of the Apostles. The money was to be used to take care of the needs of the poor. No one made an appeal for such an offering. It was prompted only by the flow of divine grace in their hearts.

I have difficulty with high pressure attempts to get people to give. I am aware that some churches do not have enough of the grace of God to survive without it, but I know that something better is possible. When the grace of God is bestowed upon a congregation of believers, they will be zealous to give. When you hear critics complaining about having to give, put them on your prayer list. They need an outpouring of divine grace on their lives. They are running short on grace. It makes a volunteer willing, excited, cheerful to give.

### ***III. THE CHURCH GIVES SACRIFICIALLY***

This goes deeper than being generous. It is possible to be extremely generous, and not really give of yourself. "And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will." Evidently, Paul had not expected their participation. Because of their circumstances, he had eliminated them from his plans, but they surprised him. They sought him out so that they might have a part in the project.

Their giving began at the right place. They "first" gave themselves. This could be a "temporal" first. This would indicate that their first offering was not financial, but spiritual they presented themselves to the Lord as a living sacrifice. This was surely true of those outstanding stewards. However, the word could be a logical "first". This would mean that they gave first priority to this gift. This was the most important aspect of their giving. This, too, would surely be true of their giving. It is better to see both of these ideas in the word They just began at the right place. Their gifts were not substitutes for themselves, but were rather expressions of their own commitment to the Lord.

What did this involve for them? Evidently it included making themselves available to the Lord or him to do with them whatever he might please. They were available to do any service he might direct. They would be a missionary as well as give a mission gift. Too many of us give our offerings as a substitute for our lives. We give our gifts to enable someone else to do our service for us. Real sacrificial giving grows out of this commitment made by the Macedonian Christians.

Paul indicates that this was "by the will of god." This means that they (lid this in response to the Lordship of Christ over their lives. Knowing it to be. His will, they gave themselves to the Lord, and to His servant Paul.

This is a sure sign of the grace of God on a congregation. I have observed it again and again. Mission volunteers come from those congregations that have the grace of God on them. Laymen whose lives are totally at God's disposal come from such congregations. The grace of God makes this kind of difference in a church.

***CONCLUSION:***

There is no substitute for this grace. Therefore, an. ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that it abounds in this grace also." This admonition encourages tile Corinthian church to give priority to seeking what the church at Philippi has known. This says to me that we ought to be encouraged to seek the kind of grace upon us that has been on our sister churches in Atlanta and in Houston. Those are not the only places where such grace is being demonstrated, but they are two of the in the news.

There are some needs before us that demand we know this grace is upon us. The only way this church can fulfil its destiny before the Lord is for the grace of God to be on us. What we need is not an effective fund raiser, though they have their places at times. What we need is not a new finance program, though such programs can be helpful. What we need is a new touch of divine grace, a new infilling of the Holy Spirit, a new shower of heavenly blessings. Then everything else will fall into its proper place. My heart is hungry for such a touch of grace upon us! How about yours?