

# The Grace of Giving (Caring for One Another)

2 Corinthians 8-9  
September 25, 2016

Back in February, we began our journey through the book of Ephesians by looking at Ephesians 2:1-10. This is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. One of the things I love most about it, is the beautiful picture it paints of the church: The church is a **Grace Community**. We are a gathering of sinners saved by grace and sinners saved to serve. This picture is not just isolated to the book of Ephesians though. We find this grace identity all throughout the NT, and, frankly, throughout the OT as well. Romans 4:16 reveals God's plan for a Grace Community all the way back to Father Abraham: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring...He is the father of us all."

Grace is a key feature of what it means to follow Christ. Perhaps that's why 2 Corinthians 8:6-7 grabbed my attention: "So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 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."<sup>1</sup> As a Grace Community, we should strive to excel in all things related to grace. It's in our spiritual dna; it's part of our core identity as Christ-followers.

This focus on grace in vv. 6-7 is carried forward just 2 verses later in 2 Corinthians 8:9: "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." The word for "poor" means that Christ literally became penniless, extremely poor, like a beggar poor.<sup>2,3</sup>

This is difficult for our middle class sensibilities. If all of us became penniless, how would any of us be able to help anyone else? Then we'll just each become one more person in the bread line. How is the church going to pay its bills without steady financial givers? How does that make sense? Good question. But, let's not dodge the reality that Jesus made a decision to become poor so that He might make others rich. We all need to take some time to wrestle with this.<sup>4</sup>

What an incredibly humble and generous thing for Jesus to do; to leave the luxuries of heaven and embrace the poverties of this earth. Rather than fairly condemning all of us to hell, Jesus chose to rescue us from sin and bring justice. This required him to dwell among us; to set up His tent on planet earth, roll up His sleeves, and get involved in our messiness. But that's what God's representatives do. Jesus is the ultimate advocate and high priest who chose to put on flesh. He is our example of what it means to have an incarnational ministry. We are the body of Christ, His hands and feet at work in the world today.<sup>5</sup>

In order to excel in this grace of giving, we need to share with those less fortunate than ourselves. Or, to put it another way, we are blessed so that we might be a blessing. God's grace toward us should impact our attitudes about money and our posture toward those with financial needs. Now, it's important for us to recognize that these verses in 2 Corinthians 8-9 are all about Christians helping other Christians.<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:1 mentions, "...this service to the Lord's people." And 2 Corinthians 9:12 talks about, "...supplying the needs of the Lord's people..." These verses, of course, made me immediately think of our church's Benevolence Fund. We receive an offering for this fund on

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<sup>1</sup> Verb "excel" is a subjunctive in a ἵνα clause making it imperatival in force; i.e. a command. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan 1996, p. 476-477.

<sup>2</sup> "πτωχεύω (πτωχός): to be or become poor as a beggar, be (extremely) poor" Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 896). Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> In Mt. 8:20, "Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'"

<sup>4</sup> "Of the preexistent Christ δι' ἡμᾶς ἐπτώχευσεν **πλούσιος** ὢν for your sake he became penniless, though he was rich 2 Corinthians 8:9 (here the emphasis on **wealth** vs. poverty **relates esp. to status**" see Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Phil. 2:6-7, teaches us that Jesus "...did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage..." So, do we consider our high position or our wealth as something to be used for our own advantage or for that of others?

<sup>6</sup> I actually ran into this text when I was preparing my message on compassion and justice. That was way back on May 11. We talked about child sponsorships and justice initiatives to help those who can't defend themselves. But I realized it would be out of context in some ways to use 2 Corinthians 8-9 for that particular sermon.

Communion Sundays. This concept of “grace” is linked to the giving and receiving of benevolence between Christ-followers.

Now all of us would rather be on the giving side; the one blessing others. But, sometimes we need to allow others to bless us. In humility, we need to let others serve us. In order for any of us to excel in the grace of giving, some of us must graciously receive the gift. Please let us help by letting us know how we can help. We can't help each other if we don't know what the needs are. To put it another way, please don't hinder someone else's attempt to live out their faith. Let us care for you. Let us hold you up when you need a helping hand. And, when I need help, I will humble myself and receive back from you in turn.

2 Corinthians 8:12-15 puts all of this in context for us: “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: “The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the ways that we care for one another is financially. But caring for one another goes beyond meeting financial needs. In a strong, thriving Grace Community, we want to care for each other by meeting a broad range of needs. I'm blown away when I read about the Early Church in Acts 2:42-47: “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

V. 46 reveals that the Early Church not only met together in the temple courts but also in their homes, sharing meals and sharing gladness. The Early Church shared together in times of worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, communion, and prayer, in addition to helping each other financially. And they saw God do some very wonderful things as He added to their numbers.

Eventually, the Early Church grew well beyond its original group of about 120 people.<sup>8</sup> And I'm sure it had to find ways to stay connected. I wouldn't be surprised if the Apostle Peter once said, “I think we need to launch a small group ministry.” It's one of the best ways to stay close-knit as a church grows larger. Our church is more fully embracing small groups this fall. We recognize the reality that in a church of about 450, even though we want to know and love everyone in this fellowship, there are limits to how many close relationships we can really maintain. In fact, that's why many people leave churches when they get larger. Most of us just don't enjoy the emptiness of feeling alone and isolated in the middle of a big crowd.

So, we've launched a small group initiative. We have multiple times, locations, and options available. And, if none of them meets your need, we are providing help and support for you to launch your own small group. We're convinced that in order for our church to be spiritually healthy and vibrantly growing, we must have everyone participate in a small group of some kind. Small groups give us an amazing opportunity to meet the challenge of individually caring for each person in our church. This helps us go beyond just knowing someone's name, and actually knowing them as a person. It allows us to grow in genuine relationships to the point where we can celebrate each other's joys and carry each other's sorrows. If you are not currently in a small group, you are truly missing out. Please make sure that you get involved in one very soon. It's for your own good but it's also for the good of this church body.

In addition to this focus on Small Groups, I'd like you to imagine something else with me. And we need to use our imaginations because what I'm going to talk about next qualifies as a little audacious.

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:15 is referring back to Exodus 16:18 when the Israelite Community was wandering in the wilderness and sharing together in the manna and quail that God sent each day. See NIV study notes.

<sup>8</sup> See Acts 1:15 and 2:41.

Imagine our church, EFC Bemidji, at its very best. Imagine a Grace Community where no one ever slipped through the cracks, where no one got lost in the shuffle. Imagine a place where the people here were so focused on caring for each other that they set aside every distraction and gave themselves over to fully loving one another.

Anyone who was hurting would be helped and cared for. Anyone who was happy about something had others to share that with. Anyone with financial needs would get help not only with immediate money but long term encouragement and job search support. Anyone struggling with loneliness would find meaningful friendships. Anyone with marriage or family problems would have immediate and trustworthy help and support. Imagine if, whatever the struggle or challenge or need, our church became the place where you could get real, lasting help and support. How cool would that be right?

But, this is an incredibly tough goal; to individually love and care for every person who walks into this room. This is much more than any one pastor can do. In fact, it's more than any team of pastors can do or even a well-equipped and eager Welcome Team Ministry. The only way to accomplish something of this magnitude is for everyone to participate. We would need each person to willingly initiate in caregiving with those around them. It would be something mutual; it would go in both directions. Don't you think it would be an amazing thing though? If every single person who walked through the doors of our church was genuinely loved and cared for? Raise your hand if you think that would be incredible. (Good. I agree. And thanks for volunteering!)

Now, the fact is, some of us are already experiencing this because we've been here a long time and we are well networked. We've embraced this church and we've felt its people embrace us. But for many of us, we're not really there yet. But we'd like to be. We long for that feeling of being part of this church family. But we still feel on the outside a bit. It's a friendly place but not a place where we find our best friends; at least, not yet.

In pursuit of this ambitious goal, I'd like to share an idea with you. I think we may have found a way to take our church of ~450 people and shrink it down to about 50 or so. This will make it easier to keep track of each other. It will make it more realistic to learn everyone's name and to get to know them more in-depth. What I'm talking about is developing a care network that is more manageable. I'm talking about one way that we could potentially focus our efforts and actually begin to achieve this ambitious goal. This could enable us to become more like the kind of church we need to be.

The strategy is something we'll call "Section Groups." A Section Group is a way that we could literally provide care for every single person in our church. Just about every single person who walks through the doors of this church walks into this sanctuary and sits in one of these chairs. I mentioned earlier that this goal is audacious, so much so that it called for helium balloons! Each of these balloons numbered 1-6 represent a section of chairs in our sanctuary. So, the people over here represent section 1. Then, section 2 and 3 and so on. The people sitting around you, in your section of chairs, are now part of your Section Group. I'm inviting each one of us, as part of this church, to connect more closely to the people sitting in our Section Group. You can do this several ways:

1. Learn everyone's first and last name. Not 450 names; just 50.
2. Learn about their work, school, family, and hobbies. Get to know them on more than just a surface level.
3. Spend time together at least 1x/month outside of this room. Perhaps you could have coffee together in the Fellowship Hall after a Sunday service. Maybe you could invite them out for breakfast or lunch sometime this week. Or, have them over to your house for supper. Not all 50 at once! But maybe a few. Invite them over for a football game or a bike ride. Or, maybe your entire section could meet out at Diamond Point for a picnic. You get the idea.
4. If you haven't seen them at church lately, make sure they're ok. Here's a compelling question: If one of us stopped attending this church, who would notice? Let's be a church where people can't slip through the cracks.
5. If someone new sits in your section, welcome them! Smile, introduce yourself, answer any questions that they have about our church. Urge them to fill out a Welcome Card and take 5 minutes at the end of the service to walk them over to our Welcome Booth. Make sure they get a mug! (Any maybe share the chocolate with them. ☺) Because you consistently sit in your

section in about the same row every week, you are like the best person to recognize that someone new is sitting in your section.

Even though some of us are pretty excited about this idea, please don't feel forced into doing any of these things. It's totally up to each person's individual choice. You can simply say "no thank you" if this sort of thing makes you feel uncomfortable. But, this morning, I've tried to clearly lay out the opportunity we have as a Grace Community. In fact, we intentionally saved our greeting time until this point in the service. Here's your opportunity to begin focusing on the people in your Section Group. Let's take a few minutes right now to make sure that we know the names of the people sitting in our section.

We read again about the Early Church in Acts 4:32-33, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all." **Let's be this kind of Grace Community.**

PRAY: "Lord, teach us to genuinely care for one another in this place. May we generously provide for each other financially and in many other ways as well. Please make us into a Grace Community that excels in grace in every way. In Jesus Name, Amen."

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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