

A GRACIOUS ACT - 2 COR. 8:1-9

THE GIFT OF GIVING #1

Dr. Chandrasekhar couldn't help but be disappointed. Any university professor desires for his classes to be full for that means the students like and respect him. And Dr. Chandrasekhar was recognized as one of the foremost expert in Physics in our entire nation. In fact, he was on leave from the University of Chicago to do some critical research at an astronomical observatory some 100 miles from the University. But he had agreed to commute back twice a week to teach a special class in Astro Physics because he recognized the importance of it. And the dean had assured him that with his reputation and popularity, the class would be filled to overflowing with students. Perhaps, even a waiting list to get on board. Imagine Dr. Chandrasekhar's disappointment when he learned that only 2 students had signed up for the class. Only 2 students. How could he justify driving 100 miles each way on poor roads to Chicago 2 times a week just to teach 2 students? I mean, this was 1947 not 2010. Our interstate road system had not yet been constructed. And the class was scheduled during the winter months. No, he couldn't possibly justify driving into cold, windy Chicago twice a week just to teach 2 students Astro Physics.

But then Dr. Chandrasekhar remembered that he had given his word that he would teach the class. And both of these students were looking forward to the class and counting on him being there. And Dr. Chandrasekhar had already come to grips with the fact that the gift that he had been given had to be passed on to others - and it was his giving spirit in part that had enabled him to rise to the top of his field. So Dr. Chandrasekhar commuted twice a week all through that winter of 1947 into downtown Chicago to teach those 2 students Astro Physics. And those 2 Chinese men devoured every word that he taught them and carefully did all of their homework. They would later say that it was that class that turned their lives around. They would say that 10 years later in 1957 when they both were accepting Nobel Prizes in the field of Physics. Dr. Chandrasekhar was pleased. He was pleased even though he had never won a Nobel Prize himself and would not be awarded one until 1983 - some 26 years after those 2 students that he had sacrificed to teach.

Nobody will ever be able to calculate all of the blessings that have come to the human race through one person giving of himself in some way to another. It would be impossible to compute such a total because almost all of the blessings that have come to us have come in such a fashion. For almost everything that we have that is of value has come at the expense of someone's sacrificial giving.

We are entering the season of the year when we commemorate the greatest gift that has brought the greatest blessing in the history of the human race. The Christmas season celebrates the blessed event of

God giving his one and only son so that we can be cleansed from the defilement of sin and restored to fellowship within the family of God once again. God's son became a human so that we could become children of God. What an incredible gift that was. So it is only natural and proper that we would focus attention on the importance of gifts and the giving of gifts during this holiday season.

We are going to address this theme the Lord willing during the next several weeks as we prepare our hearts for a Christmas celebration. This morning, we will look at giving as an act of grace from Paul's words to the church of Corinth found in 2 Corinthians 8. Next week, the Lord willing, we will look at God's natural law of giving. And then on the Sunday before Christmas, if the Lord wills, we will focus our attention on that indescribable gift that God gave to man, the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ.

Now it is most fitting and important for us to consider this theme of giving, for we are living in a culture that is progressively becoming more and more self-centered. And this trend is producing much unrest and dissatisfaction in the lives of many Americans.

When you think of all of the changes that have occurred during just these past few decades, it just staggers the mind. The prophet Daniel concluded his prophecy by saying that in the last days "many will go here and there to increase knowledge" 12:4. These 2 characteristics - rapid mobility and the increasing of knowledge can certainly describe our generation. Imagine what the early pioneers would have thought if after they had labored out to the west in a covered wagon taking months or even over a year someone would have told them that in just 100 years a person would be able to fly out west and with the time change get there just about the same time that he left. Do you think that they would have been able to comprehend such a concept? I know when I began my pastoral ministry, typing out my sermons on my electric typewriter with all of my books laid out all over the desk, I never imagined a time when I would just have a laptop computer with a 500 book theological library that would automatically search by passage or topic and internet access at the touch of a button. The explosion of knowledge that we have experienced is unprecedented in human history.

But with all of the blessings that we have received, we also must realize the cost that we have paid and the consequences of this cost on society in general and on each of us in particular. I think that we must see this clearly, for we can never counter these effects in our lives until we first see them.

Our country has made the unprecedented advances in materialism and technology under a dominant economic theory that is commonly called "Consumerism". Webster defines consumerism as "the economic theory that a progressively greater consumption of goods is beneficial". Our economy believes that and works hard to promote it. The more goods that are produced and bought, the better our economy is rated.

And consumerism has greatly enhanced our lifestyles and conveniences. There can be no question about that.

But in order for consumerism to work, we have been subjected to an assault that has taken a toll on our society in general and each of us individually - we should be aware of this. Many years ago, Vance Packard recognized what was happening and exposed it in a book entitled "The Hidden Persuaders". In this book he spoke of an alliance that producers of goods had made with practitioners of psychology to manipulate the American consumer to buy more goods. That manipulation has come out in the form of advertising.

Have you ever wondered why many people feel ashamed if their clothes are out of style? Have you ever wondered why many people get itchy to buy a new car after the old one is 2 or 3 years old even though it is still running very well? Have you ever wondered why many people are horrified to discover an age spot on their arm or flecks of dandruff on their shoulder? We often forget that these are not normal responses throughout many parts of the world - they are very peculiar to our country.

I have made many trips to third world countries in my life. In these places if the average person had 2 complete changes and clothes he would consider himself to be fortunate and would wear them for year after year. Cars are run literally as long as they could possibly be repaired. And for those of you who have been to Europe, you know that dandruff is a commonly accepted sight. But we have been under the barrage of advertisers telling us that perfectly good items are obsolete so that we will buy more products for so long, that we begin to believe what they are telling us. And the cumulative effect of this barrage is that we become more and more obsessed with consuming, buying products, better products, new and improved products. We can easily lose perspective. We can become dissatisfied with what we have. We can lust after more and do anything to get it. After all, we can buy new products now and not begin to pay for them until 2011. And we go deeper and deeper in debt, purchasing all of these things that we are going to be told are obsolete in 6 months. And soon, we can find ourselves imprisoned by the very blessings that have made our lives so much more efficient and convenient. And what perhaps is most damaging to our character and spiritual growth is that our attention can become more and more focused on ourselves, consuming and buying and taking, and we can forget that God's means of spiritual development and true happiness comes from producing and sharing and giving to others.

Now one of our main problems is the fact that a desire to share and give runs contrary to our fleshly nature. And that is the reason for the Apostle Paul speaking of giving and generosity as being a grace. 3 times in 2 Corinthians 8:1-9, Paul referred to the generosity of the Corinthian church in giving to others as a manifestation of God's grace in their lives.

Grace is something that God gives to us that we don't deserve. It is a divine gift given for our spiritual benefit. *GIVING IS A GRACE* Paul says. So in essence, the desire to give is a gift that God gives to his children for their blessing and spiritual growth. We must cooperate with God in the development of this grace of giving - that is the reason for Paul writing these words to the church at Corinth.

WHY IS DEVELOPING THE GRACE OF GIVING SO IMPORTANT IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER? Why does God put such a premium on this gift of giving in the Bible?

1. BECAUSE THE GRACE OF GIVING CAN BE NURTURED IN EVERY CHRISTIAN'S LIFE. We see this principle in the first 4 verses of 2 Corinthians 8.

How often do we assume that the gift of giving is only for those who are rich? After all, they have the means to give to others. And it is true that God gives special riches to some people so that he might use them as a channel of financial blessing to others. Most of our major Christian institutions are supported by a few wealthy donors whom God has burdened.

But listen to Paul's words about these people in the Macedonian Churches. READ 8:1-4.

2CO 8:1 And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.

These people were not rich. In fact, Paul uses the words "extreme poverty" to describe them. Yet they gave anyway. And they were richly blessed as a result.

One of the beautiful truths of God's word is that God makes available to every Christian everything that is needed for his or her spiritual growth. There are no elite Christians who have the advantage over others. There are no second-rate Christians who never will be able to measure up. No, the basic grace that is needed for spiritual growth is made available to all believers. Those who avail themselves of the grace will grow spiritually.

Giving is an example of this principle. Everyone can give. Now it is true that some can give more than others - but that is not really the point in God's eyes. You see, God knows that everything that we have is a gift from Him anyway. God is more concerned for spiritual growth in his children's lives than for anything else. And he knows that spiritual growth is stunted more quickly by a self-centered, selfish spirit than in any other way. So God made it possible for every one of his children to be able to give. The amount is not the primary issue. It is the act of giving that is most critical in God's eyes.

2. But notice a second reason why giving is so important from this passage. BECAUSE THE GRACE

OF GIVING CAN HELP US EVALUATE OUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH. READ VS. 5-7

⁵ 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. ⁶ So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But just as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

Paul speaks of these believers first giving themselves to the Lord before they gave their financial gifts to others. And then he later says that he was testing the sincerity of their love by his encouragement for them to give to others. These phrases along with Paul's using the word "grace" 3 times to describe their actions in this passage indicate that Paul realized the fact that the generosity of these believers was an evidence of the inner work of grace that God was developing in their lives. This is very important for us to see. True Biblical giving with the right motivation is an evidence of God's inner work of grace in our lives. For it is not the natural response of our flesh to give generously to others. But it is the natural response of the new creation to give of oneself to others.

One of the great struggles that we each have in our Christian life is evaluating how we are progressing. To evaluate spiritual growth is often a difficult process. It is hard to measure such abstract virtues as love or joy or peace or holiness. But here Paul gives a concrete test that each of us can apply to our own lives. It is the test of giving. The test of generosity. God is a giving God. That's part of his basic nature. As we grow more and more into His likeness, we will become more and more giving people. If we are not becoming less self-centered, we have serious reason to question our spiritual growth. If we are becoming more and more generous in our lifestyles, this becomes a confirmation to us that we are a member of God's family and we are growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Finally, the grace of giving is indispensable in our lives BECAUSE AS WE NURTURE THIS GRACE OF GIVING, WE FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. VS. 9

⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

Now frankly, the example of the Lord Jesus Christ is very difficult for us to fully comprehend for it runs directly against the grain of almost everything that we are taught. We often hear stories about people who have experienced the American Dream. The American Dream is to start in poverty and end with riches. And working towards the American Dream is a good thing for it generally evidences a commitment to hard work and education and perseverance and many other admirable character traits. But we have to realize

how revolutionary and counter-cultural Christ's model that we celebrate during this Christmas season is. Christ's Model started with indescribable riches and ended up with extreme poverty. Paul speaks of this model when he writes in verse 9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

This is God's ultimate model of success. His son, laying aside all of the riches of heaven that were rightfully his, so that he could share those riches with others, allowing those mired in the poverty of their wickedness to become spiritually rich in his righteousness and eventually to share with him in all of the richness of heaven.

Now God is not opposed to His people having money. God often gives material prosperity to His people. But God does want each of his children to follow the example of His one and only Son. God doesn't want his children to hoard his blessings selfishly. In fact, God will not likely allow his children to do that because He knows that this pattern of life will eventually ruin them. God wants his children to be channels through whom he can pass his blessings on to others. God wants his children to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. God wants his children to grow in his grace - and growth in grace in part means becoming less selfish and self-centered and more generous and giving to others.