Sharing with Those in Need

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson
The lesson examines how God wants us to participate in Sharing with Those in Need. The study's aim is to remember that we can help others in practical ways as God enables us. The study's application is to establish a mind-set of giving from a Christian and godly perspective.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: 2 Cor 8:9

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Whenever possible, Paul preferred to motivate and instruct by deed as well as by words. He did not hesitate to urge the Corinthians and others to imitate his manner of life (cf. 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1a; 1 Thes. 1:6; 2 Thes. 3:7-9). But he was also quick to point to other worthy examples, including Timothy (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:19-20), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:18), and of course, Christ (Phil. 2:5; 1 Cor. 11:1b; 1 Thes. 1:6) and God the Father (Eph. 5:1). Paul gave the Corinthians two examples of liberality: the Macedonian churches and Christ.

8:1-2. The Macedonian churches—those in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea—had initially experienced the grace of God in the person of Paul and his proclamation of the gospel (Eph. 3:2-12) during his second missionary journey. In Philippi (Acts 16:12-40), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), and Berea (Acts 17:10-15), the apostle preached the gospel and founded churches. The believers in these places suffered because of their faith (Phil. 1:29-30; 1 Thes. 1:6), but they remained steadfast (Phil. 1:5; 1 Thes. 1:7). They even contributed at that early juncture to Paul’s material support (Phil. 4:15). While their material welfare apparently deteriorated (cf. Phil. 4:10), their spiritual well-being increased commensurately. Paul attributed this to the grace of God, His unmerited favor. They had ample reason to be sorrowful (6:10). Like Paul, the Macedonian churches had learned that God’s grace is sufficient to take their weaknesses and through them to display God’s power (4:7-12; 12:9; Phil. 4:13).

8:3-5. The Macedonians were eager channels of God’s blessing because they lived in accordance with His will (v. 5). Their actions revealed their love and devotion to God and others (cf. Mark 12:28-31; Phil. 2:3-8, 20-21; 1 Thes. 4:9-10). Entirely on their own initiative the Macedonians became involved in the collection. Paul, perhaps thinking they too were suitable candidates for aid, hesitated to approach them about the need in Jerusalem. However, like the poor widow Jesus commended (Mark 12:41-44), they were undeterred by their own penury and gave selflessly, trusting God to meet their needs (Phil. 4:19). One could wish that today more churches were like the Macedonians who pleaded...for the privilege of sharing.

8:6-7. In the light of this effusion of God’s grace on the Macedonians (vv. 1-5), could the Corinthians, who had benefited so richly from God’s grace (excelling in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and...love; cf. 1 Cor. 1:4-7), do any less? Paul thought not, so he dispatched Titus to administer the Corinthians’ portion of the collection, to give them opportunity to excel in this grace of giving. (“Grace of giving” [2 Cor. 8:7] and act of grace [v. 6] both translate the one Gr. word “grace.” Giving is the essence of grace!) Titus had gained experience in the collection and distribution of charitable monies elsewhere (cf. Acts 11:29-30; Gal. 2:1). But it is unknown when he became involved with the Corinthian collection. In writing to the Romans Paul had mentioned the gift (God-given spiritual ability) of “contributing to the needs of others” (Rom. 12:8). The right use of this divine gift was to give generously. Paul himself had certainly given unsparingly to the Corinthians, and they in turn had professed their affection for him (2 Cor. 8:11). Paul wanted them to excel in their “giving” because giving expresses love (1 John 3:11, 16-18).

8:8-9. Paul, ever sensitive to the charge that he dominated the churches he founded (cf. 1:24), preferred that their motivation not stem from external commands (e.g., 8:7b). He wanted them to be motivated by their internal devotion (the sincerity of your love) to him and more importantly to the Lord. Could the Corinthians face being compared with the Macedonians in this regard? Or could they face being compared...
with their Lord, who is supremely worthy of emulation? Few statements surpass verse 9 as a pithy summary of the gospel (cf. 5:21). From the splendor of heaven Christ came to the squalor of earth. The Incarnation was an incomprehensible renunciation of spiritual and material glory. The One who was rich, who had everything, became poor, making Himself nothing (Phil. 2:7). He assumed mankind’s debt of sin and paid for it with His life (Phil. 2:8). The Corinthians had directly benefited from His generosity (your and you are emphatic). He became what they were (poor) so that they could become what He was and is (rich). Therefore was a material offering to Him (cf. Matt. 25:34-40) too much to ask? (1 Cor. 9:11)

Concluding that the Corinthians would not refuse his appeal, Paul offered a brief rationale for the collection and an explanation of how it should be handled.

8:10-12. Paul’s advice (cf. v. 8) was, finish what you have begun (cf. v. 6). Best wishes—desire and eager willingness—are no substitute for good deeds (cf. James 2:15-16). An individual’s giving should be commensurate with his means... according to what one has (cf. 1 Cor. 16:2). By that standard the Macedonian gift, like the poor widow’s offering (Mark 12:41-44), might in one sense be easy to equal but in another sense be hard to exceed.

8:13-15. A guiding principle for material exchange among churches is equality. Paul was not wanting some church to have relief (anesis; cf. 2:13; 7:5) while the Corinthians were hard pressed (thlipsis; cf. 1:4). That would be like robbing Peter to pay Paul! Paul no doubt approved of the Jerusalem church’s early efforts in meeting each others’ needs by having everything in common (Acts 2:44). This expressed their mutual concern for all members of the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:25). This principle was modeled after a divine pattern. When God gave food to the Israelites in the wilderness He did so equally according to their needs (Ex. 16:16-18). The church should not do less.

8:16-17. Like Timothy (Phil. 2:19-20), Titus was genuinely concerned about the welfare of those he served. In a self-centered world, such a concern was a distinguishing feature valued by Paul in his associates. No dictator (cf. vv. 8, 23), Paul had asked Titus to lend his assistance to a project which it seems Titus had eagerly (with much enthusiasm) and independently (on his own initiative) determined to do.

8:18-21. To accompany Titus was an unnamed, highly respected (praised by all the churches) representative probably from the Macedonian churches. He would take their gift to its destination in Jerusalem. Paul’s motivation in organizing this collection was to honor the Lord (cf. Matt. 25:40; Gal. 2:10). To that end he scrupulously worked to avoid bringing any disrepute on His name through charges of mismanagement or avarice (2 Cor. 8:20; cf. 12:17-18).

8:22-24. In addition to the previously mentioned brother (v. 18) and Titus, Paul’s partner and fellow worker, a third member (anonymously called our brother) was appointed to join the collection party. He was apparently an appointee of the Macedonian churches. He was zealous, and he and the other unnamed brother (v. 18) were an honor to Christ. His presence served both to help buffer Paul from accusations of personally profiting from the collection and also to spur the Corinthians on toward completing their project. By their giving, the Corinthians could demonstrate (cf. 9:13) their love (cf. 8:8).

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

Our text comes in the midst of a long passage on Christian giving. Paul began this section of Scripture by remarking on the tremendous example of the churches of Macedonia—how they gave generously, willingly, and joyously despite "deep poverty" (2 Cor. 8:2). He then moved along to exhort the Corinthian church to do the very same thing (vss. 8, 11). Their giving was to be directed at meeting the needs of other believers (saints) who were suffering from poverty (cf. 2 Cor. 9:12). So we are not looking at a situation of routine giving, as we might do for our churches or favorite ministries. This addressed giving to urgent needs. Paul viewed it as sharing some of what God had given to come to the aid of other believers. The text lifts up the Lord Jesus as our ultimate example of giving to others. We were needy sinners, and Jesus gave His all for us so that we could be saved. This was grace, which was freely given without requiring any corresponding gift in return. The One who possessed heavenly riches embraced the poverty of this world in order that we, who are poor sinners without hope of salvation, could be made rich. The Lord did not give just so that we would have a little help and relief. He gave so that we are now endowed with all the heavenly riches that He Himself possessed and possesses. An Asian Christian leader once talked to me about "nice Christians." These are people who seem to follow the Lord based on the charity they have received from more prosperous Christians. Once the charity stops, though, these people are less than enthusiastic about Christ. He also warned me that they do not learn the proper way to give. When a person
gets in the habit of taking, taking, and taking some more, he seldom learns how to give. Our model for our own giving must be the Lord Jesus Christ. We must not be like those who only take and receive; we must learn how to give and share. If the Lord becomes our model for giving and sharing, relieving the needs of those in want, we will give willingly, as the Lord gave to us without compulsion. We will also do it generously. If our eyes are fixed on how the Lord Jesus gave to us, how will any other response fit? He has been generous to us, and we will receive "all things" (Rom. 8:32). In turn, we should give joyously because we know that it glorifies Him. There are needs to meet all around our country and the world. God has blessed most of us with the means to share with others, both for the sake of the advancement of the gospel and for the sake of relieving human suffering. Can our sharing and giving be characterized as generous? Is it willing? Is it joyous? Or do we do it in miserly fashion and reluctantly? Let us look at the Lord Jesus and learn to give as He has given to us. This is what we learn from the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ."

**Lesson Introduction and Background**

**From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

The exploits of Robin Hood and his Merry Men in Sherwood Forest have long entertained imaginations. Numerous film versions have been made of the Robin Hood saga, including remakes of the story on an asteroid, among gangsters in Chicago, and in an animated version in which the hero is a talking fox. Central to the Robin Hood legend is his role as a “social bandit” or “heroic outlaw,” as expressed in the description that he “robbed from the rich to give to the poor.” In Robin Hood’s world, the rich are wealthy because of severe taxation, exploitative labor practices, and/or downright dishonesty. The poor are hard-working and honest, but suffer poverty because of oppression from the rich. Robin Hood is therefore a hero to the poor (for whom he provides money and goods) and a villain to the rich (from whom he steals). His thievery is justified because of the positive things he does with his stolen wealth. With some allowance for motive (Proverbs 6:30, 31), the Bible never condones stealing, however. The eighth commandment, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15), is applied consistently. The Scriptures also have harsh words for wealthy people who oppress the poor, which may be a form of stealing (Proverbs 22:16; Amos 5:11, 12; James 2:6, 7). Is there a better way to correct economic inequity than to resort to Robin Hood’s methods? Is robbing the rich the only way to relieve the poor? Within the church, Paul teaches another way. It neither steals from the rich nor ignores the desperate plight of the poor. This is the subject of today’s lesson.

The travels of the apostle Paul gave him bases of operation in several cities of the Roman Empire in the mid-first century AD. He was a native of the commercial hub of Tarsus and studied in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3). He became a leader in the early Christian center of Antioch (11:25, 26). He founded churches in important Greek cities such as Philippi (16:11-40), Corinth (18:1-18), and Ephesus (19:1-41). He served as a bridge between the Greek/Gentile world and the Jewish world in the first-century church. The latter was clearly evident in Paul’s role in the project we often refer to as the Jerusalem collection or the offering for the poor saints in Judea. Paul and Barnabas visited Jerusalem around AD 51 to help decide whether circumcision would be required of Gentile Christians (Acts 15:1-29; Galatians 2:1-10). They left the city assured that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised and with the responsibility to “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10). This was more than just a request to be charitable. There seems to have been an expectation that Paul would be asking his network of churches to give money for the economic relief of suffering Christians in and around Jerusalem. This relief project is mentioned several times in the New Testament. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church (written about AD 56), Paul instructed the Corinthians to make weekly contributions to the fund so that it would be ready when he visited. They were also to select men who would accompany him in taking the offering to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The collection of this gift provides the backdrop for Paul’s teachings on Christian stewardship that are found in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians about a year after writing 1 Corinthians, thus around AD 57. This indicates that the Jerusalem relief project was a plan spread over several years, for Paul did not arrive in Jerusalem until AD 58. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-6, which immediately precedes today’s lesson text, Paul informed his readers of some details of this relief offering for the poor Christians of Judea. The offering from the Macedonian churches was complete, which likely includes the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea (see Acts 16:12; 17:1, 13). The generous results of the collection effort encouraged Paul. Titus was coming to Corinth as Paul’s envoy to help the Corinthians complete their part of the relief mission (2 Corinthians 8:6).
Gracious Giving (2 Cor 8:7-9)

7 But as you abound in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you abound in this grace also.
8 I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others.
9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

Giving out of love (7-8)

Giving out of love to please God (Phil 4:18)
18 I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

Giving out of love comes from a pure heart, sincere faith and good conscience (1 Tim 1:5)
5 The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Giving out of love should be the only debt we should have (Rom 13:8)
8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.

Giving out of love that shows faith working (James 2:15-17)
15 Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Giving out of love through actions (1 John 3:18)
18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Giving out of love and enthusiasm (2 Cor 9:2)
2 For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.

Giving out of humility (9)

Humility by considering others interest before ours (Phil 2:2-4)
2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.
3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.
4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Humility that gives in secret (Matt 6:2-4)
2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Humility that gives what one has even if it is not money (Acts 3:6)
6 Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."
Humility that abides by it is better to give than receive (Acts 20:35)

35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Humility that gives oneself as a sacrifice to God (Eph 5:1-2)

1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 2 and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Challenges In Giving (2 Cor 8:10-15)

10 And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago;
11 but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have.
12 For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.
13 For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened;
14 but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack—that there may be equality.
15 As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack

Finish what you start (10-11)

Finish by keeping the faith (2 Tim 4:7)

7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Finish by faith and actions working together to make faith complete (James 2:22)

22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

Finish by throwing off everything that hinders (Heb 12:1)

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Finish by being committed to do the will of God (John 4:34)

34 "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

Finish by being committed to finish the assigned tasks (John 5:36-37)

36 "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. 37 And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form,

Finish by being committed to the end of life (John 19:30)

30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.
Give willingly (12)

*Giving willingly is always recognized by God (Mark 14:4-9)*

4 Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? 5 It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly. 6 "Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. 7 The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. 8 She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. 9 I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."

*Giving willingly is the manifestation of a contented spirit (Phil 4:10-14)*

10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength. 14 Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

*Giving willingly to honor God (Prov 3:9)*

9 Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops;

*Giving willingly from what God has given (Deut 26:1-2)*

26 When you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, 2 take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the Lord your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name

*Giving tithes willingly to the Church (Mal 3:10)*

10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

Give through equality (13-15)

*Equality through sharing and giving with hope (1 Tim 6:17-19)*

17 Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. 18 Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

*Equality through good stewardship (Luke 16:10-12)*

10 "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

*Equality through giving cheerfully (2 Cor 9:7)*

7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

*Equality through giving in proportion (Num 35:8)*

8 The towns you give the Levites from the land the Israelites possess are to be given in proportion to the inheritance of each tribe: Take many towns from a tribe that has many, but few from one that has few."
Equality through giving generously from what God has supplied (2 Cor 9:10-11)

10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

Equality through giving to those in need from own possessions (1 John 3:17-18)

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Master Model: Jesus Christ (8:8-9)

8 I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

The “false apostles” at Corinth are able to achieve their goals only by using a heavy hand with the Corinthian saints. They “use their authority” to get the results they want (2 Corinthians 11:20). Paul is not this way. He does not want to resort to his authority as the basis for the Corinthians’ giving. Paul makes it clear that he is not commanding them to give, but rather encouraging them to give as a proof of their love. Paul seems to be saying that the Macedonians have demonstrated the sincerity of their love by the sacrificial generosity of their gift to the needy saints in Jerusalem. That establishes a kind of human benchmark against which the Corinthians’ love can be measured. The earnestness of the Macedonians helps set the standard by which the Corinthians may prove the sincerity of their love.

There is, however, a much higher standard than this. The human benchmark of the Macedonians’ love and generosity is far surpassed by the divine benchmark for love and sacrifice to those in need. The ultimate example of gracious giving is our Lord Jesus Christ, by His sacrificial atoning work on the cross of Calvary. He was infinitely “rich” in the presence of His Father (see John 17:5; Philippians 2:6). He willingly “became poor” in His incarnation (Philippians 2:5-8). He was born in a very humble setting, having a cattle trough as a bed, and being born to parents who were far from rich. He left the “wealth” of heaven and took on the “poverty” of this earth in His incarnation. He who was rich became poor for the sake of those of us who were spiritually “bankrupt” in our sins. Through faith in His sacrificial work on the cross of Calvary, He has made all those who trust in Him exceedingly rich.

Whatever we might do for those who are poor can never compare with the work of Christ on the cross. Our material wealth can never compare to His heavenly glory; and our sacrificial poverty can never compare to the “poverty” He endured in His incarnation. The person and work of Christ is the basis for our motivation, and it is the standard for our ministry. The cross of Christ, that message which seems foolish to the unbelieving (1 Corinthians 1:18-25), and certainly to the unbelieving “false apostles” (see 2 Corinthians 11:4), is the unending theme of all of Paul’s teaching. As he can never speak enough of the cross, we should never hear enough of the cross of Christ (see Colossians 2).

Finish What You Started (8:10-12)

10 And I give my opinion in this matter, for this is to your advantage, who were the first to begin a year ago not only to do this, but also to desire to do it. 11 But now finish doing it also; that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. 12 For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have.

Paul’s words in verses 8 and 10 sound remarkably similar to 1 Corinthians 7:25. He clearly indicates that his words are not a commandment directly communicated to the Corinthians from God through Paul. He does not legislate how much the Corinthians should give. Having expressed that the opinion he holds is his personal conviction, Paul goes on to declare his conviction as such. Paul’s opinion is that generous giving is a desirable thing which works to the donor’s advantage. The Corinthians, after all, were the very first of the churches to make a beginning in this matter a year ago. If the Corinthians were the first to begin to give, and they are not yet
Sharing with Those in Need

In a year’s time, some things surely must have changed. Perhaps some suffered unexpected losses and are no longer able to give as much as they had intended. Unlike the hucksters who urge people to give what they cannot afford, Paul does not lay a guilt trip on the Corinthians. They should simply complete what they started, but only within the means they have to do so.

Over the years, I have seen some who wanted to do something great for God, something big and significant. For whatever reason, this was not possible. But rather than doing what they could do, they do nothing at all, waiting for a time when they can do all they want. Paul urges those Corinthians who have suffered setbacks to do whatever they are able to do now, thus completing their giving so their contributions can be collected and sent to those in dire need.

The Principles of Equality and Reciprocity (8:13-15)

13 For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality—14 at this present time your abundance being a supply for their want, that their abundance also may become a supply for your want, that there may be equality; 15 as it is written, “HE WHO gathered MUCH DID NOT HAVE TOO MUCH, AND HE WHO gathered LITTLE HAD NO LACK.”

Paul has just written an encouragement (not a commandment) to the Corinthians to complete what they have purposed and promised regarding their contribution to the poor. He now concludes his exhortation with the statement, “it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have” (verse 12b). Paul urges the Corinthians to keep their commitment according to their ability to do so. He now further clarifies himself by setting forth two governing principles: (1) the principle of equality and (2) the principle of reciprocity. Let us briefly consider each of these, as Paul seeks to demonstrate from the Old Testament.

First, the principle of equality should govern our giving to those in need. In the secular world, there is a principle which directly opposes the principle of equality: “the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” When a person has wealth and prosperity, he has power over those with limited means. The “borrower,” the Proverb tells us, “is the lender’s slave.”

7 The rich rules over the poor, And the borrower becomes the lender’s slave (Proverbs 22:7).

The rich have the ability to gain even greater wealth at the expense of the poor because they have the power to do so. The ungodly seek to increase the gap between their wealth and the poverty of those around them. They have the advantage, and they use it to their own ends. The Bible presents an opposite picture. In the Old Testament and in the New, political or economic power (to mention just two forms of power) should be employed for the good of those who are weak and powerless. Power must not be used to oppress the helpless, but to help the helpless. When I have more than my neighbor, I need to consider how to best use the resources of which I am a steward to enhance the life of the one who is poorer. It is not a matter of how much wealth I possess as much as the fact that I have more than my needy brother.

I want to be very clear about what I am saying here. I am not saying that the Bible teaches us to practice some form of communism. With communism, the state owns property, not the people. With Christianity, people own property, but they do not selfishly claim it as their own: “And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them” (Acts 4:32). While every believer possesses private property, they must not selfishly claim its ownership and use it for only themselves, but for those in need. We say, “What’s mine is yours.” By saying this, we mean that we are willing to give up our possessions for the benefit of another.

In teaching the principle of equality, Paul does not suggest that people give up their right to own private property; neither does he indicate that everyone must live on exactly the same standard. All Christians do not need to drive the same year and model of car, nor own precisely the same home as everyone else. But when one believer has more than the one who is in dire need, he or she should seek to narrow the economic distance between them, rather than to seek to widen it.

The Old Testament is full of indications that God does not want the rich to get richer while the poor become poorer. That is why the Israelites were not to make loans to their fellow-Israelites at interest. This is why all properties must revert to their owners at the Year of Jubilee. In the New Testament as well as the Old, the desire to accumulate and hoard great wealth was condemned, while charity was praised. The bottom line is this: when
we realize that a brother is in dire need, and we have the resources to alleviate that need, we should generously and joyfully do so. Equality, not inequality, should be our desire.

**The second principle is that of reciprocity.** In more contemporary terms, this principle may be summed up by the expression, “What goes around, comes around.” Paul says that while we may have more today so that we can help our brethren in need, there may very well come a day when “the tables are turned” and the “shoe is on the other foot.” Generosity we show now toward a brother in need may become generosity from that same brother to us when we have a time of need.

Paul illustrates what he has said by turning us back to an event described in chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus (citing verse 18). The Israelites had come out of Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and were now in the wilderness where there was almost no food. God provided for Israel’s nutritional needs by giving them manna to eat. When God first gave manna to the Israelites, He tested them by instructing that only enough manna should be saved as was needed for that day—an omer per day, per person (Exodus 16:16). Paul reminds us that when the time came to measure out what each had collected, it always came out right. Those who gathered little had enough, and those who gathered much did not have too much. Everyone ended up with just what they needed.

How could this happen? Was this some kind of miracle that God performed? That is possible, but I don’t think Paul understood it that way. I believe the people went out to gather manna and then returned to measure it out to see how much they had collected. Measuring the manna with a one omer container showed that some had more than they needed, and others less. Those with more manna than needed gave to those with less, and so everyone had just what they needed. This is the kind of equality for which Paul wants the Corinthians to strive. Some earn more money than others. Those who have “more than they need” should share with those who have less than they need.

*God does not prosper His people so that they may indulge themselves; He prosfers some so that they may share with those in need.* In so doing, they demonstrate their brotherhood as those who trust in God. In effect, this is what Paul writes to Timothy.

17 Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. 18 Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, 19 storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Is this not what our Lord teaches as well?

19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21 for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

*(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/learning-be-liberal-2-cor-81-15)*

**Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary**

Frank Houghton (1894-1972) was a missionary in China. During the persecution of Christians there in the 1930s, he wrote a beautiful Christmas song titled “Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor” to encourage his fellow missionaries. Its two opening lines are drawn directly from our lesson’s key verse, 2 Corinthians 8:9. Houghton and his fellow missionaries had given up much to preach the gospel to the Chinese, but he reminded them that the example of Christ surpassed by far anything they could ever have done. Houghton is just one example of a long line of individuals who gave up much for the sake of Christ. This line stretches all the way back to the New Testament, beginning with Peter, who had a fishing business (Matthew 19:27). Paul himself was a highly educated rabbi who came from a family wealthy enough to send him from Tarsus to Jerusalem for schooling (Acts 22:3). Yet he adopted the vocation of an itinerant missionary who had to live hand to mouth at times (Philippians 4:12). The examples they set for giving includes martyrdom by some.

Churches and individual Christians should help relieve suffering for two reasons. First, it’s a biblical requirement to do so (1 John 3:17; etc.). In the Old Testament, assistance to the needy was seen as reflecting God’s compassion toward them (Psalm 140:12; Jeremiah 22:16). For his people to go through the actions of worship while ignoring the genuine needs of destitute people around them made their worship a sham and an insult to God (Isaiah 1:10-17). Second, and less obvious, the giving of aid can help free the giver of selfishness,
greed, and prejudice against those in need. And we probably have more of a fortune than we think, from which we can give. Consider this conclusion by Pew Research Center, published July 9, 2015:

The U.S. stands head and shoulders above the rest of the world [in terms of income]. More than half (56%) of Americans were high income by the global standard. . . . Another 32% were upper-middle income. In other words, almost nine-in-ten Americans had a standard of living that was above the global middle-income standard.

Most of us do have extra dollars; it just takes planning and sacrifice to free them up. It might be as simple as one less cup of coffee a week or as complicated as downsizing a home to make cash available. But the first question is, do we care?

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. Followers of Christ should be full of faith as well as grace (2 Cor. 8:7)
2. As children of God, we should be quite adept at extending grace to others as we follow the example of Christ (vss. 8-9)
3. When we start a good work, we should continue it. We should finish the task with more fervor than when we started (vss. 10-11)
4. God cares more about our willingness and eagerness to give than about the amount we give (vs. 12)
5. We are encouraged to give out of our abundance. God uses us to meet the needs of others (vss. 13-14)
6. When God's ways are followed by all, everyone's needs are met (vs. 15)