

You Know the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ

✦ **Not ~~how much~~, but from how much** (vv.1-5)

✦ **Test the sincerity of your love.** (vv.6-9)

✦ **Match eager willingness with completion.** (vv.10-15)

In the name of Jesus, God's gift of grace for us, dearly redeemed family of God:

In this week's pastors' meeting of our North Circuit it was my privilege to preach. I asked my brothers in ministry how we can talk about stewardship without giving the impression we're trying to pad our own pocket. We've all taken an oath to preach the whole counsel of God. And God's Word says plenty about money. But stewardship is not really about what we give. Stewardship means managing what God gives so generously to us in time, talent and treasure. Stewardship expresses your faith as a fruit of faith flowing from a heart reborn. Stewardship is faith-born love in action. Like our pastors whose congregations have been richly blessed, Paul joyfully addressed the Corinthians in his second letter. So I get to praise God with you – not for what needs to be done, but for what God has already done and continues to do among us. This is true about you too: **You Know the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ.**

✦ **Not ~~how much~~, but from how much** (vv.1-5)

Christians in their weakness will sometimes say things that show spiritual blindness and how they need more grace from God. One especially foolish thing some will say about stewardship is when they hear about someone giving generously, "Oh, they have money." That isn't even true statistically. Studies have shown that the most generous gifts to charity in America don't come from the wealthy. They come from the "working poor" who give far more to charity, not just percentage-wise but in actual dollar amounts. How is that possible? We worship the a generous God who gave us His own Son to save us from stingy selfishness. Now we can't help *overflowing* in rich generosity. Then He blesses even more.

That's what was happening among the Macedonians Paul mentions here. Remember the Bereans who nobly searched the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true? Remember Paul's Second Missionary Journey how the Thessalonian congregation grew in spite of persecution? Remember the Philippians like Lydia and the jailer at Philippi? They kept following Paul around with their offerings. They sent him help and helpers again and again. How could the Macedonians give in such hard times? The Corinthians also knew this by experience. It was all "*about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*" They had little money, but God gave them a big heart to overflow in gifts.

God's grace produced three amazing gifts: "*They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.*" Remember the widow in the temple whom Jesus said gave more in her two copper coins than all the rich from their abundance? For the Macedonians too it was **Not how much, but from how much** they gave. When Pastor Paul suggested they should cut back, "*entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*" The Holy Spirit empowered them to help with this special offering for Jewish-Christian famine victims back in Jerusalem! But their best gift? "*They gave themselves first to the Lord, and then to us in keeping with God's will.*"

✦ **Test the sincerity of your love.** (vv.6-9)

Do you hear any whining here? We aren't really talking about money as much as the joy of Jesus that overflows your heart. "Generous givers aren't born that way; such an attitude is a result of being

reborn. The grace, or unmerited love, of God that brings salvation to the sinner also inspires a new life of service that includes unselfish, generous giving.” (D. Valleskey, *The People’s Bible* – NPH) God had gifted the Corinthian congregation with excellence **“in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us,”** so Pastor Paul can encourage them, **“see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”** A reborn heart drowns sinful selfishness and instead just loves to give like God.

We could publish our budget shortfall every week in the bulletin. I could share how fifteen couples and individuals fund nearly ¾ of our budget. Maybe we need to know that our per communicant giving averages well under 4%. But I want to be very careful about how we share these important details. They show we need to grow as a congregation. As Pastor Paul puts it, **“I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.”** It’s good for each of us to ask ourselves, “Am I carrying my fair share of this ministry? Am I helping us reach into our neighborhoods and beyond? Am I helping train future pastors and teachers?” And how can I be confident you can honestly ask yourselves such questions? Why don’t I even want to know who the strong givers are or who might be falling behind? This is the reason that fills me with such joy: **“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.”** Your eyes of faith have watched His birth into poverty, His lowly ministry, His humble death on the cross for you. Christ has made you spiritually rich!

✦ Match eager willingness with completion. (vv.10-15)

It’s great when people speak up and want to give. When they step up and start giving we all rejoice. Now Paul’s advice is, **“Finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.”** That’s key to our stewardship.

This is where percentage giving is such a big help. You can set that percentage where you want, but as we heard in our first two Scripture Lessons today (Malachi 3:6-12; Hebrews 7:1-5,11,15-19), the 10% tithe is the number to which God attaches His promise of **“more blessings than you have room for.”** Overflowing closets and garages too crowded for your cars suggest God is way ahead of us on that. And don’t think the 10% tithe is part of Moses’ Law. Abraham gave the tithe to Melchizedek 700 years before Moses received God’s Law at Mount Sinai. And the Holy Spirit inspired the New Testament writer to the Hebrews not to command, but to commend it in Abraham’s example.

That’s why I did for my kids what my Dad did for me. First job, sit them down with ten dollars: “Give the first back to God. Put the second in the bank. Have fun with the rest.” One daughter: “First to God, eight to savings, one to spend.” As with individuals so with congregations. When New Life took God at His Word and **“tested”** Him as He dares us in Malachi 3:10, our finances turned around. As one former New Life President used to say, “You can’t outgive the Giver, but it’s sure fun to try.” (Dick Stindt)

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. Then there will be equality, as it is written: “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little.” Manna in the desert enough for all!

Years ago I pleaded with Dee Radke, “You have the time and talent to plant all these flowers, but you don’t have the money. Let other members pay for them.” Finally she gave us a few of the receipts so we could reimburse her and Richard. This week we will lay her ashes to rest at Elmhurst Cemetery. There’s no money from her county to cover this. But your generous gifts have enabled us to help Richard and Dee month-by-month. Now those gifts will honor her earthly remains until Christ returns to raise her and us to bask in the glories of heaven. **“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Because He lived and died and lives again for you, heaven’s glories soon will please us. More stories of God’s grace must wait for BIC classes. For now, let’s give God the glory in our offerings too. Amen.