

Life Compelled by Love: Love-Compelled Giving

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

I want to talk to you about “love-compelled giving” today. **Giving is at the center of the heart and ways of God.** Think about it: God gave us life. Then, when people walked away from him, God gave us his Son. Jesus, God’s gift to us, gave his life for us. Jesus gives us his Spirit to empower us, sustain us, and guide us. Jesus gives us his church to walk with us. Again, Giving is at the center of the heart and ways of God. And, God’s giving is always motivated by his love for us. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. Jesus loves us so much that he gave his life for us even while we were sinners.

Because giving is at the heart and ways of God, the more we become like him, the more that giving will characterize our lives too. And, like it is with God, our giving is to be compelled by love. Do you believe that?

I think I’ve believed in love-compelled giving from the earliest days of my life as a Christian. I saw it in my Dad, who loved to give both his weekly “tithe” and more as he was able. But, I don’t think that “love-compelled giving” really settled into my heart until I went to India in 1976. I was doing concerts and meetings in Mysore, a beautiful city in south India https://farm1.static.flickr.com/808/39745980570_8f6e6f1928_b.jpg. A pastor from a more rural area came to one of the meetings and, afterward, urged me to visit his church to sing and preach there. I said yes.

So, on a Sunday morning, as the pastor drove me from Mysore to his church, I learned that his church people were very poor. He told me that over 70% of his people did not have enough to eat. Knowing that, I was quite shocked, when I arrived, to experience the welcome I received – with gifts, music, and much fanfare. After the services, I was treated to an amazing feast on the lawn outside the church.

As the pastor and I traveled back to Mysore, I told him how overwhelmed I was by the people’s joy and generosity in spite of their poverty. I said, “Shouldn’t I send their gifts back with you?” He said, “Absolutely not! American missionaries left their homes and families to bring my people the gospel of Jesus. We believe that giving always will be the result of following Jesus whether you are rich or poor. I didn’t ask them to do what they did in welcoming you. They wanted to do it from the depths of their hearts. Did you not see their joy?”

I thought of that life-changing day as I prepared my sermon for you this week. As I did, I wept in my office just as I wept when I visited that church. Why? Because what we see in today’s text is almost exactly what I experienced that Sunday in India. In our passage, the Apostle Paul spoke of a church who, in the midst of deep trials and extreme poverty, had great joy as they gave with “rich generosity” to others. I think we have a lot to learn from them. Let’s consider those two churches mentioned in our passage this week.

The Two Churches: Macedonia and Corinth

2 Corinthians 8-9 calls us to further God’s work in the world through love-compelled financial giving. The issue at the time Paul wrote the letter was that a famine had devastated the mother church of all churches, i.e., the church in Jerusalem. The famine, that was accompanied by earthquakes, had such an impact on the early churches that it is referred to in the Book of Acts, Roman, Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians. And, it not only Christian and Jewish histories that speak of the famine in Jerusalem but Roman historians too.

Church people in other cities were summoned to support their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. Their example of doing so is a part of why we at LAC often send financial support when we learn of natural disasters in our nation and world. The Apostle Paul was deeply committed to this Jerusalem relief ministry and enlisted churches like the large wealthy church in Corinth to give. When he did, at first, the people in Corinth had said yes to his fund-raising appeal. But later, a group of people, who said they were apostles but who were really frauds, called a halt to the Corinthians’ giving so that the money could stay at home in Corinth. I’ll leave you to speculate on why they might have done that.

But, there were churches in Macedonia, <http://www.jesuswalk.com/2corinthians/maps/achaia-macedonia-map-300x208x72.gif>, churches probably as poor and afflicted as the one in Jerusalem, who heard of the mission and begged for the opportunity to be involved in the giving in spite of their own poverty. And, “my-oh-my” – did they ever give! Listen to God’s Word: *Their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability (8:2-3).*

It’s clear that, in 2 Corinthians, Paul used the churches in Macedonia as a testimony to how all who have experienced the love of Jesus should give. There is such a powerful lesson in this. Sometimes, when Christians give, we don’t tell others about our giving because we are rightly concerned that talking about our financial

giving will bring glory to us personally instead of glory to God. But, there are also **good reasons why we sometimes tell about the giving of other believers** -- as Paul did here. Why?

- 1) **Our giving is a big part of our witness to the world.** People will see that we value the things of God more than we temporary things. How did Jesus put it? “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (**Mt 6:21**).”
- 2) **Believers learn how to give as they watch other Christians give.** That’s why Paul said in **8:1**, “*Brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*” And, that leads to these words in **8:7b**, “*So now you, see to it that you also excel in this grace of giving.*”

How will new believers know how to give if they don’t see longer-time believers giving joyously, generously and sacrificially? How will your children and grandchildren know how to give unless they see it in you? Financial giving to and through your local church should simply be a way of life – one that is passed on from believer to believer, and from generation to generation. I believe that even when you make a will, you should consider how your final act of giving might speak to your family and friends about what you value. I urge you: Don’t leave your church out of that will.

This kind of giving that we see in the Macedonian church people is what I’m calling “love-compelled giving”. Do you remember what Paul said in 2 Cor 5? Church people in Corinth were saying, “Paul, you are out of your mind! Why would you leave a life of wealth and prestige to go into the world to tell people about Jesus and to be beaten and imprisoned for doing it? Why would you give so much so that others – even the Gentiles you once hated -- might be blessed?” His answer? “The love of Christ is what compels me. That’s what directs my life.”

Today, I’m saying that the love of Christ compels our financial giving too – whether we are rich or poor. Our God is a giving God. People who have received his gift of grace love to give too. So, in the time, we have left, let me tell you a few **principles about love-compelled giving** we learn from the Macedonians:

Love-Compelled Giving Starts with Fresh Commitments to the Lord – “*They gave themselves first of all to the Lord... (8:5a).*”

We often think about following Jesus being a one-time surrender of our lives to Jesus. And, indeed, our relationship to God begins when we say, “I acknowledge I have sinned and need forgiveness. Here is my sin. I turn from it and give it to you. Here is my life. I believe in Jesus.” But, let me tell you what I have learned in my walk with God: **That first step of faith leads to a life of faith.** I wake up in the morning and say, “All I am and have has come from you, O Lord. Today, I will live for you and not for myself.” And, when it comes to financial giving, I think we should take time to say, “Lord, you gave your life for me. All that I have has come from you. Lord, I want to give as you have given.”

Do you see how the Bible spoke of the Macedonians? “*They gave themselves first to the Lord.*” Only after that did they determine how they would give financially. This is why we have our offering within the context of our worship services, i.e., it is an act of worship – of putting God first in all things.

Love-compelled giving is a way of life in which we consistently give ourselves to the Lord. If you will start as the Macedonians by saying, “Lord, as I determine how to give today, I remember that you gave me all I am and have -- and then you gave your life for me” – then you will find your financial giving will be transformed.

Love-Compelled Giving Is More Often a “We” Than an “I” – “*They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us (8:5).*”

One question that v. 5 evokes is, “**Why did the Macedonians give through their local church and its founding pastor Paul instead of directly to the Jerusalem Church?**” You might say that it just a matter of practicality and expediency, that Paul and his colleague Titus would be going back to Jerusalem so it’s easier to let them take our collective offering back there. However, when you see the larger teaching of the Bible and the practice of the early church, you will see there is more to it than that. You’ll see that it is the church as a whole that seeks God’s guidance about where the church family’s giving should be focused. Back then, as now, there were countless needs in the world. But each local church, through its spiritual leadership, sought the Lord about which needs they should address.

In the Old Testament, in Mal 3:10, called God's people to bring the first of their tithes into the local storehouse – into their place and people of meeting together with God. The Hebrew word “kal” in that verse is sometimes translated “all” of your tithes. But, I think the meaning is the firstfruits, the first focus, of your giving – bring that into your local worshipping community. That's what the Macedonians did. They had to learn to trust their founding pastor and their church eldership to have sought the Lord and then to distribute the offering for the purposes for which they were given.

The point is that, when you enter into a relationship with God as Father, you also become a part of your Father's global church and a part of a local gathering of that church. We're one of those. We at LAC are a local gathering of God's eternal family; not merely individual believers. I believe that too many people simply operate from the notion that “I can discern myself how to decide where I should give. I don't need my sisters and brothers to participate in that aspect of my life.” But, the Bible indicates that this is not true. **Love-compelled giving is more often a “we” than an “I”.**

Here's the point: Our lives are compelled largely by an experience of the love of Christ within our local church community. And, our world will be changed largely through the love of Christ flowing through Christian communities planted in local neighborhoods. Here at LAC, our elected leaders and pastors have set a number of priorities:

- We'll focus on the discipleship of those who come into our church family – through our worship together, through providing smaller grace-filled communities for children through senior adults and through facilitating opportunities for each of us to serve in God's work in keeping with the Spirit's gifts.
- In our community outreach, we'll focus on issues related to homelessness, public education, immigration and the reentry of those who leave prison and need support.
- In our global outreach, we'll focus on bringing the gospel to unreached people who have not had a clear witness to Jesus, especially among Muslim people.
- We will be like the Macedonians and seek God's guidance about how to reach out to those who go through crises in our world as the Jerusalem church was going through.

All this is not to say that you should not give directly to other causes as God leads you. But, I am saying that your giving should begin with your local church. If you withhold your financial giving from your church family, you will also withhold your love, your prayers, and your service.

Love-compelled giving flows into joy-filled generosity.

I want you to look again at these remarkable statements found in vv. 2-5:

- 1) “*In spite of being in a severe trial, the Macedonians were filled with overflowing joy in the midst of extreme poverty that welled up into rich generosity (8:2).*”
- 2) “*Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And, they exceeded our expectations (8:3b-5a).*”

When I read these verses, two questions jump into my mind. **The first is, “What brings about that kind of joy-filled generosity?”** I know that the answer is the title of this sermon series, i.e., when we have experienced that Jesus died for us out of love for us, our lives – including our financial giving -- are compelled by that love. To make that point in 2 Cor 8:1-9, the Apostle Paul used the word “grace” 5 times.

Grace means to be given something that we have not merited and that do not deserve. Those who have been involved in scouting remember that scouts can earn “Merit Badges” by achieving things or by showing they know how to do something. Scouts cannot obtain these badges unless they have completed the required activities, thereby “meriting” the badge. So “unmerited” then means to receive something that you did not earn or something that you do not deserve. Grace is God's unmerited favor and blessing. The Bible is teaching in this passage that **those who experience grace will respond by wanting to give to others as God has given to us. Whether we have little or owe have much, we'll urgently plead with the Lord to give us opportunities to give.**

That point brings me to my **second question: Why is it that even genuine Jesus-followers do not always have this kind of joy-filled generosity?** This question is worthy of an entire sermon. But, right now, let me simply say that we still live by faith and not yet by sight. Until Jesus returns and completes his work in us, we will be prone to having our joy and generosity in giving be affected by things like these:

- Our walks with God having times that feel stale -- This happens in our human relationships, so we should not be surprised when it happens in our relationships with God too.
- The trials of life depleting our emotional resources – When we're tired, sick, or overwhelmed by responsibilities in life, it's hard to have joy. God knows that.
- We get angry with or frustrated with our church family – It's hard to give to the priorities that your spiritual leaders set when your upset with them.

All these things happen -- and were happening back when 2 Corinthians was written. The Macedonians were going through extreme afflictions. The Corinthians were upset with their founding pastor. From them, I think that the principles we seen today might help you to be faithful in your giving until the joy returns:

1. Make a fresh commitment to the Lord who gave his life to you – Give yourself first to the Lord.
2. Remember that our Father asks that our first place of giving should be to the local church that he has given to us – even when that church is imperfect. Speak into those things you agree with in your church – just as we see happening in 2 Corinthians. But, do not neglect the grace of giving to and through your church.
3. And let the love of Jesus always flow into generosity. When you do, as you hear what God is doing in the lives of people in your church and that your giving is supporting it, your joy will eventually return.

My call to us all is to develop a way of life that includes generous giving first to your local church. That way of life will keep your faithful and in your stewardship through times of staleness, frustration and weariness that always come in this world – and will continue to come until the one who has given us eternal life come to make all things new.

I leave you just as Paul left his church in **v. 9**: *“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.”* Give like that and I assure you it will be to God's glory and to your joy – Amen.