CHRIST’S POVERTY AND OUR RICHNESS

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Key Verse: 8:9

“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.”

We returned to our study of 2 Corinthians after two weeks. We have studied up until chapter 7. Our last lesson was about how Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church was restored, which resulted in great joy to him. God is the God of all comfort, restoring broken relationships in Christ Jesus. The Corinthians believers had godly sorrow that brings repentance unto salvation while worldly sorrow brings death. In chapters 8 and 9, we will study about the matter of giving. In fact, it is going to be a model for Christian giving, a theology of Christian giving. In these chapters, Paul endeavors to get the Corinthians to make significant generous gifts toward the poor saints in Jerusalem. That is the issue here. But out of this comes a general pattern for all Christian giving. According to Acts 21:35, Jesus himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” Giving for God’s kingdom is a direct pipeline to God’s blessing. It is the path to prosperity, which is totally different from the world’s way of prosperity. May we truly learn God’s way of prosperity and live a prosperous life. God does not want us to live a selfish baby Christian life in stinginess, but a mature prosperous Christian life in abundance from God. The principle is to give and receive more from God and then give more and receive even more and this cycle keeps going in life. In such a life, God wants us to glorify him and be a blessing to many, one after another. In today’s passage, 8:1-15, Paul sets the example of Macedonian churches, and more importantly the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.

**First, the example of Macedonian churches (1-8).** Verse 1 says, “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.” Macedonian churches were an example of giving generously. Yet, what Paul says first about the churches in Macedonia is the grace God has given the churches. It is not human philanthropy, human kindness, but the grace of God. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “…I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” Similarly, it was the grace of God that the Macedonian churches were an example of giving for all the churches. At the same time it was the grace of God that motivated the church to make such gifts. The grace of God worked in their hearts producing this generosity. It is not just human giving. They did not receive the grace in vain, as Paul said in 6:1, “As God’s fellow workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.” Most importantly, they knew that by the grace they would be saved from their sin and Satan and eternal punishment in Christ Jesus and could live a new life in him. This grace was alive in them.

Then Paul says in verse 2, “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” Their human condition was that they were in the most severe trial and were extremely poor. But they gave magnanimously and generously in response to the work of the grace of God in their hearts. Their giving was rich, abundantly, and overflowing. Later, we will learn that this was an offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem. We see clearly that the giving is not a matter of what one has, but a function of the heart. The heart’s desire to give transcends all difficult human conditions, even poverty itself.

Here “rich generosity” is in other translations “the riches of their liberation.” They were rich in liberation. Liberality is a good synonym for generosity.  It’s a word that means the opposite of duplicity, or the opposite of being double-minded. It has the idea of single-mindedness rather than double-mindedness. Generosity is the attitude that triumphs over duplicity. They were not rich in money, not rich in possessions.  They were rich in single-minded selfless, humble devotion to others and to God.  Their generosity came from having a single purpose.

And in their giving they were so joyful. What kind of joy did they have? Isaiah 12:3 says, “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” They had undoubtedly the joy of salvation. Paul also said in Philippians 2:12, “…continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Surely, they were rejoicing with trembling (Ps 2:11) that they were working out their salvation continually in such a life of giving. And certainly, they had the joy of obeying Jesus’ words. “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Ac 20:35). They had the joy of seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness first. And they had the joy of storing up their treasures in heaven giving their hearts to God, as Jesus said in Matthew 6:20-21, “Store up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” It is exchanging earthly treasure for heavenly wealth.

Then Paul says in verse 3, “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” And their giving was appropriate, giving according to their ability, and then sacrificing beyond their ability. Both are written. And Paul continues, “Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.” Their giving or offering or service was voluntary with willingness. They knew that it was the privilege to share in the service to the saints. About the service to the saints are written in Romans 15:25-27, “Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleaded to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.” At this point we need to understand the situation of the saints in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was born at the time of the Pentecost at the year of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Many Jewish diaspora came to Jerusalem and after hearing Peter’s message, 3000 repented and became Christians and stayed in Jerusalem even with no human security. That was the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. And the social atmosphere was that the believers in Jesus Christ became outcasts with no secure jobs. Their faith was true that they were called saints, yet poor in their human condition. At that time also there was a severe famine in Jerusalem. Paul knew the seriousness of their situation and was making this great offering for them. Also, it was making a unity between the Gentile churches and the church in Jerusalem. Paul had such a deep concern for the whole church of God. The Macedonian churches knew this and really wanted to have this privilege of sharing in the service to the saints, ungently pleading with Paul and his fellow workers. They were willing and joyful to make such a contribution for those whom they have not met.

Then verse 5 says, “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.” Here we see the deep meaning of the offering. It is giving oneself to God first, which is an important part of worship.

When we think of the example of Macedonian churches, the grace they received from God motivated them to their rich generosity. They transcended difficult circumstances and extreme poverty. They had joy in their giving. Their giving was appropriate and sacrificial. They were willing with voluntary spirit. They knew the privilege of sharing in the offering for the body of Christ. Their giving was a part of their worship, offering themselves first to the Lord.

Then Paul says in verse 6, “So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part.” Here, the service to the saints was expressed as the act of grace. And Paul says in verse 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.” Here again it is described that giving is grace. and this kind of giving is in perfect harmony with other Christian virtues.

And in verse 8 Paul says, “I am not commanding you, but want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.” Their giving was a proof of love. We can give without love, but we cannot love without giving. Love is followed by giving.

**Second, the example of Jesus Christ (9-15).** Then Paul says 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.” Without verse 9 the passage flows smoothly. When Paul thought about the rich giving of Macedonian churches, his mind must have been struck by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. In mentioning the grace, Paul used the full name, not the grace of Jesus, the grace of Christ, the grace of Jesus Christ, or the grace of the Lord, but “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”. He is the one who saves his people from their sins; he is the Anointed Messiah and King; he is the Lord. Interestingly the expression, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” or “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” is written 7 times in the New Testament, and except this case here in 2 Corinthians 8:9, all were used at the end of Paul’s letters in 2 Corinthians 13:14, Galatians 6:18, Philippians 4:23, 1 Thessalonians 5:8, and 2 Thessalonians 3:18, and Philemon 25. The profound doctrinal verse 9 with this expression, “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” is tucked right in the middle of this practical section of giving about the Macedonian churches’ rich generosity and his expectation of such generosity from the Corinthians church.

Who can describe the grace of Jesus completely in one sentence? There are several wonderful statements about Christian doctrines. About the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:12, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” What an amazing and concise description of the meaning of Christ’s substitutionary death! John described the grace of the incarnation this way, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” in John 1:14 and God’s love in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus himself stated the purpose of his coming, “For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). All these words are wonderful representative doctrines of Christianity. And here is a complete and succinct description of the grace of Jesus: “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.” The words used in this expression are so simple that even a child can understand their meaning. There are no difficult words; there are no confusing words; there really aren’t any theological words. And though it can be easily grasped as to its simple, straightforward meaning, the fullness of what it says is incomprehensible.

However, let’s try to comprehend this profound verse. Three things are mentioned here, Jesus’ richness, his poverty, and the purpose. Firstly, “though he was rich.” How rich he was! He was rich as God is rich. He is God eternal. The whole universe and all things in the world belong to him. According to Colossians 1:16, all things were created by him and through and for him, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. So, all things are of him as his possession. John said in John 1:3-4, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In his was life.” John the Baptist testified concerning Jesus in John 1:15, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.” He was even before Abraham. Jesus said in John 8:58, “before Abraham was born, I am!” In John’s gospel Jesus made seven “I AM” statements. He is the one, “I Am who I am” (Ex 3:14). He is self-existent and so eternal. He was rich with eternal richness. The wealth of our Lord Jesus is beyond comprehension. It is boundless; it is infinite. He is infinite, and His wealth is as infinite as His being.

And “yet for your sakes he became poor.” How can we describe his poverty? Yes, he was born in a manger and live a poor life. Yet, his poverty is well expressed through the Incarnation. God became man. This is from the richness of God to the poorness of man. Paul described this in Philippians 2:6-7, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness.” Of course, in his ministry there was a treasurer and those women including Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod’s household supported the ministry out of their own means (Lk 8:3). Yet undeniably he lived a pure and poor life possessing nothing in this world. At his death the soldiers cast lots for his clothing. The rich God became a poor man. Rich people do help poor people. But rarely, if ever, do the rich make themselves poor in helping others. But Jesus indeed became poor emptying himself. Finally, Jesus died on the cross, giving his own very life as a ransom for many.

Lastly, “so that you through his poverty might become rich.” This is the whole purpose of his being poor from being rich. How can we describe the richness of those who believe in Christ Jesus? It is best expressed that they have become children of God in Jesus Christ. Who is richer than children of God in this world? John exclaimed in 1 John 3:1, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are.” God the Father purchased us by his Son’s own life and adopted us as his children, forgiving us all our sins. How destitute we were with infinite loss in our souls because of sin and as the object of God’s wrath destined to be thrown in the lake of fire. But God made us his children, paying all the price of the debt of our sin through his Son’s blood. God’s children have His life in them, the life that is true and eternal. Their lives are enriched in love, joy, peace and hope. They will be made like his Son and reflect his glory. We are heirs of God and coworkers of Christ. We have the kingdom of God as their inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. We will possess the eternal glory of the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and the new earth. In his finite grace he made us infinitely rich. Is it rue? You are richer than you think, much richer. Those believers who know this spiritual reality become rich in their hearts, which makes them truly generous. This was the case of the Macedonian church, even in their extreme poverty they showed their rich generosity in the service to the saints in Jerusalem. Paul saw the offering as an expression of the central truth of Christianity, in light of the grace of Jesus Christ that He made Himself poor to make his people rich.

When we think of Paul, he was not a rich man from the viewpoint of the world. Yet, he was not bound by material problem at all. According to 2 Corinthians 6:10, he was “poor, yet making many rich.” He confessed in Philippians 4:12, “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 eery situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” And he prayed for the Philippian believers who made a generous offering, “My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

In Genesis 18 and 19, we see how Abraham served the guests coming into his home and how Lot served them. Lot was richer than Abraham, living in the city of Sodom, while Abraham lived in Hebron. However, Abraham served the guests abundantly with the choice food joyfully and willingly, but Lot served them with very poor meal. Again, giving and serving is not the better of money but of heart. It is good that we can be very thrifty in using money for ourselves, but very generous in serving others in the name of Christ and in our offering to God for His kingdom work. This can be the principle of the life of devout Christians.

In the early UBF ministry, students were very poor. But their hearts were rich because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. So in their poverty they made offerings to God; some saved bus fares, some others lunch money and still others sold their blood. In our GBS, M. Sarah told us that she wanted to sell two bottles of blood, but a nurse said that as for her one bottle of blood was enough, two bottles were too much in her health condition. After taking the blood, the nurse gave her some extra money for her lunch, probably so that she might not faint but be restored in her health quickly. She came to Canada with just two traveling bags and with less than one hundred dollars. But God led her to the position of senior manager in TD HQ tax department and made her rich, though not that rich from a worldly standard. At that time, we could purchase a condo in downtown. In God’s ministry our Bible rent fee is more than $5000. Yet during the pandemic period we were not kicked out. God provided the necessary materials for us. Also, for Ukraine coworkers we made a rich offering, and for 40th anniversary Canadian SBC, we also offered to God richly. I really pray that our church may become a generously giving church for his kingdom work, believing that God will meet all our needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. May we really believe Jesus’ word, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” And Jesus said in Luke 6:38, “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” He wants us to use a generous measure, not a stingy measure in giving, and we will be given in much more generous measure.

Here Paul says in verse 10-12, “And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now 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.” Here again, one’s willingness is stressed according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

And in verses 13-15, “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.”

We thank and praise God for the wonderful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich.” Deeply knowing this grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and considering of the example of Macedonian church may we live an abundant Christian life through giving, the grace of giving.