

2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-14

Now brothers, we want you to know about the grace of God that was given in the churches of Macedonia: ²In a severe test of trouble, their overflowing joy and their deep poverty overflowed into an abundance of their generosity. ³I testify that of their own free will they gave according to their ability, and even beyond their ability, ⁴pleading with us with an urgent request for the gracious privilege of joining in this service to the saints. ⁵And they did this not as we had expected, but in keeping with God's will they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us. ⁶As a result we urged Titus, since he had already made a beginning, to bring to completion this gracious gift on your part. ⁷But just as you overflow in every way—in faith, in word, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you also overflow in this gracious gift.

⁸I do not say this as a command, but to test how genuine your love is, by comparing it with the eagerness of others. ⁹For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.

¹³Certainly, our goal is not that others take it easy while you are burdened, but that there may be equality. ¹⁴At the present time, your abundance will provide what they lack, in order that their abundance will also provide what you lack—in this way there will be equality.

Grace

I.

“Grace.” When Paul uses the word, it is as if it were the kind of everyday condiment that has a permanent place on your dinner table. He applies it liberally to flavor his writings. He doesn't use it carelessly, however, like the diner who automatically reaches for the salt shaker before even picking up his fork. He uses the word “grace” liberally—yet carefully. It is a spice that changes the flavor of the whole dish—making it even more exciting than it was to begin with.

The Greek word for grace was used when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek. As in Hebrew, the word also means “favor.” The word points to God's action. When Mary is told she is going to be the mother of the Savior, the angel says to her: “Do not be afraid, Mary, because you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30, EHV). The word in Greek is the same word as grace. In the Old Testament, when God noted the corruption of the world before the flood, we are told: “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.” (Genesis 6:8, NIV84). The Greek translation of the Old Testament used the same word as the word for grace.

Yes, the word “grace” points to *God's* action. Humanity is tainted by sin—inundated by sin—overwhelmed with sin—crushed by sin. The devil gained a foothold with the first sin. From that moment on he pushed mankind into the depths of debauchery. Paul says to the Romans: “Just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, so also death spread to all people because all sinned” (Romans 5:12, EHV).

II.

All people sinned. You sin. I sin. Everybody sins. We sin when we cling to money and financial security as our gods rather than looking to the true God. We sin when we are selfish rather than generous. Of course, sins revolving around money and greed are only the beginning. Sin so fills our lives that we don't even realize how tainted the meal of daily life has become, and how much it needs to be seasoned with a better condiment—with grace.

“Now brothers, we want you to know about the grace of God that was given in the churches of Macedonia: ²In a severe test of trouble, their overflowing joy and their deep

poverty overflowed into an abundance of their generosity. ³I testify that of their own free will they gave according to their ability, and even beyond their ability” (2 Corinthians 8:1-3, EHV).

Nobody seasons the concept of giving an offering with the condiment “grace” the way Paul does. The Christians Paul referred to from Macedonia were no less sinners than the Christians in Corinth, to whom Paul was writing, or the Christians in Jerusalem who were in a financial crisis, for whom the offering was being collected.

To be sure, you can get charitable giving that overflows the collection plate and fills bank accounts without the condiment “grace.” You can appeal to guilt. If you don’t give, everything will collapse around us. If you don’t give, we’ll have to shut the doors and turn off the lights and leave town. It’s all true, but it makes the giving dish bitter rather than spicing it up. You can even appeal to greed to fill the coffers. Many prosperity-gospel churches do this. *You* give to the church, and God will bless you with wealth beyond your imagination.

III.

Paul doesn’t use either of those law-oriented spices to flavor the dish of giving, but “grace,” instead. “We want you to know about the grace of God.” You see, it wasn’t *really* to the Macedonians that their generous offering could be attributed, but to the grace of God. Nor would it be to the Corinthians to whom Paul was making an appeal to complete the offering *they* had pledged to the Christians in Jerusalem. Again, it was to the grace of God.

“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9, EHV). Now we get to the action! Here is where the spice of grace is mined! This is the way the condiment makes its way to the spiritual dinner table.

The offering given by the Christians in Macedonia was given out of their poverty, Paul had said. These believers were not in the top 1% of the income brackets in the Year of our Lord 56 A.D. No, they were reduced nearly to beggar status. Yet they considered the Christians in Jerusalem to be in even worse shape than they, so they gave.

That spirit of sacrificial giving was inspired by the Lord Jesus. “Although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.” Jesus was *not* poor. He had absolutely everything. Jesus is the Creator of all things. He gave it all up. He set it all aside. He did not consider himself to be too high and mighty to put the wealth of the universe aside to become poverty-stricken.

Poverty is the way Paul describes the state of Jesus’ humiliation. The Apostles’ Creed lists the aspects of Jesus’ humility. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and buried.

It’s stated so succinctly, but it is so profound. Jesus set aside the wealth of heaven to lift up the burden of our sins on himself. In last week’s Second Lesson Paul put it this way: “God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, EHV). That’s grace. God treated his One and only Son this way so that you could be sprinkled with the condiment of grace. Or, as Paul says it in today’s lesson, “So that through his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9, EHV).

IV.

Chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians are the longest discussion of Christian Stewardship in the Bible. It would be easy, then, to focus first on the offering and miss the condiment of grace. It is the condiment of grace that is the special sauce that takes “stewardship” from a potentially bitter and unappetizing dish and seasons it to be spiritual cuisine of the highest order.

“We want you to know about the grace of God that was given in the churches of

Macedonia: ²In a severe test of trouble, their overflowing joy and their deep poverty overflowed into an abundance of their generosity” (2 Corinthians 8:1-2, EHV).

It was grace that inspired the offering of the Macedonians. The condiment of grace was the overwhelming seasoning that brought out the spice of overflowing joy in their hearts, which led to an overflowing abundance of generosity.

There is a letter in the mailbox of every member of Holy Trinity today from the Board of Stewardship. It’s a letter filled with the same kind of exuberant rejoicing that Paul shows in these words to the Christians at Corinth. At times in the past, Stewardship has found it necessary to come before the congregation and let you know that we were in dire circumstances—that the way we did ministry and certain programs themselves were in jeopardy. It was necessary because they needed to inform you of the need.

Today’s letter is different. Today’s letter is a letter to rejoice in the progress that has been made at Holy Trinity—all due to the same condiment of grace as experienced by Paul and the early Christian Church. Today’s letter indicates that the deficit we have run in the past did *not* impact us in the 2017-2018 budget cycle. Not only did we never have to borrow money from our line of credit to pay the bills that were coming due, but—as of the beginning of June, at least—we had also not had to borrow internally from restricted funds to manage to keep our cash flow current.

I rejoice, like Paul, at the grace of God that led to this overflowing joy and abundance of generosity. It is only the grace of God, by which he brought us salvation in Christ Jesus, that this kind of overflowing generosity has the kind of flavor that permeates the whole spiritual dish of ministry at Holy Trinity.

Most of you aren’t like the Macedonians, who were reduced to almost the status of beggars in the streets. Most of you aren’t the 1%-ers of the Year of our Lord 2018, either. It isn’t your poverty—or lack there-of—which identifies and flavors your offerings of love to the Lord, but God’s grace, poured out for you in abundance.

The grace condiment influences your every action in life. It isn’t dumped on thoughtlessly, but used carefully to realize that the actions of the Lord Jesus flavor every aspect of your life.

You have become rich in Christ Jesus. Not necessarily rich materially, but rich spiritually. You have the very forgiveness of sins Jesus gave up his life to win for you.

“But just as you overflow in every way—in faith, in word, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—see that you also overflow in this gracious gift” (2 Corinthians 8:7, EHV).

The work continues. Just because the Macedonians had given out of overflowing joy seasoned by grace didn’t mean that the Corinthians should *not* also give, just as they had previously pledged.

Grace has overflowed to Holy Trinity and has flavored your offerings. Still, the work continues. There is more to be done at this place and throughout the world with our offerings. The letter in your mailbox indicates this, as well.

Continue to be flavored with the grace condiment Paul uses so liberally in his various letters. It is God’s Amazing Grace that has brought us safe thus far, and grace that will bring us home—home to that eternal mansion in heaven Paul has already referenced. May God always season you with his grace. Amen.