

## Reflections on 2 Corinthians Chapters 8 and 9

These two chapters should be familiar to most church-goers. Pastors almost always preach on these chapters whenever the local church is in need of money. And because of the American value system, that need is common, maybe too common. But there's much that's important in these two chapters that is not money related, some things that are core to the Gospel. Some expositors claim that these two chapters weren't in the original letter Paul wrote but got added in at some point. I disagree. I'm certain Paul knew exactly what he was doing when he organized this letter, and I believe that these two chapters are key to understanding the whole letter of 2 Corinthians. So we ought to reflect deeply on what the Spirit has put here for us.

Expositors say that 2 Corinthians is a situational letter, that is, it was written to deal with the situation in that church of certain leaders alleging that Paul was not a true apostle. So Paul had to argue that he was, because the Gospel he preached and all he taught hinged on his authority as an apostle. The letter certainly is that, but it's more. Expositors also say that the letter reveals Paul's mind and heart as do none of his other letters. And that's certainly true too. But these statements don't really get to the heart of what this letter is all about. It reveals something precious about Christ.

Up to Chapters 8 and 9, Paul has developed several themes, the most important of which is a theology of weakness. Christ exhibited weakness, and by submitting to those authorities who thought they had power over Him, He triumphed over them. Paul adopted that theology of weakness and urged it on us too. Why? Because a Christian is to be just like Christ. That's what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Jesus was weak in that He went to the cross willingly. He suffered humiliation, agonizing pain and loss of life. As a result, all the benefits of the cross accrue to us, as well as the defeat of Satan. And Jesus was vindicated by being raised from the dead by God's power. Jesus did not use the authority and power He possessed as deity to defend Himself. Paul's argument is that we are to imitate Christ in embracing weakness and trusting instead in the Father.

So "weakness" for Paul means willing to suffer loss. Loss of money, loss of freedom, loss of personal peace, loss of bodily well-being, loss of reputation, even loss of life. Paul writes very clearly on this in Chapter 4:7-18, and then again later in 11:21-33 and 12:9-10. The context for these verses is, as God's agents on earth, actively carrying out ministry, continuing the work Christ came to do of offering the Kingdom, regardless how much loss we suffer for doing it.

"God's strength made perfect in weakness" unfortunately can be and has been misunderstood. Being "weak" does not mean we refuse to do something for God because of the concern it might be in our own power rather than in God's strength, so there'd be no results that glorify God. That is not what "weakness" means. And "weakness" doesn't mean being laid back, so that God can do His mighty works instead of us doing something in our own strength. "Weakness" means being fully engaged in ministry but willing to take risks and suffering loss if necessary. It means submitting to hostile or adverse circumstances according to God's will for us.

Now, let's look at Chapters 8 and 9, not verse by verse but at selected phrases or verses that jump off the page at me.

**"the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches"** (Chapter 8, v. 1) refers to a collection for the Jewish believers in Judea. The context of these two chapters is, Paul was collecting money from the churches he planted among the Gentiles to take as a gift to the church in Jerusalem where there was a famine and food was costly. To Paul, this was a demonstration of the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. The Gospel came initially from the Jewish believers, and the Gentiles now blessed with the same faith in the Jewish Messiah/King were showing and should show their thanks by helping with this need.

**"they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us"** (v. 5b). Here Paul gives away the real purpose of these chapters. Some commentators say that Paul alludes to the Lord to give a transcendent quality to the collection. That's backwards! It's *because of* the Lord that the Gentile believers in Macedonia are giving of themselves. Notice: not just their money. They understand that the Gospel carries with it a responsibility to be like the Christ who saved them. Christ, just like God, is a *giving* God. He gives, so we give. Thus Paul writes a few verses later, **"see that you also excel in this grace of giving"** (v. 7), meaning that the Corinthian believers were to be like-minded. Giving – money or whatever it is being given – is not a duty, nor is it a burden; it's a grace. It was grace that took Jesus to the cross to give us undeserving sinners rescue from condemnation and hell. It is grace that moves us to give to others. What is "grace"? Substitute "love," except that it's giving something that is *undeserved*. We give love gifts – not grace gifts – to members of our family. Grace gives gifts to those who we don't know and may not deserve anything from us.

**“I want to test the sincerity of your love”** (v. 8). It was Paul who tested the Corinthians, but it’s God who tests us. Love is as love does. Jesus illustrated this in His parable of the Good Samaritan. In our culture, love is a feeling, something internal. In the Bible, love is what we show by our acts. Love gives to others what they need. Verse 24 of Chapter 8 restates this verse. We need to prove our love.

**“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”** (verse 9). This verse rephrases the hymn that Paul wrote in Philippians Chapter 2. Paul is pointing us to the Person of Christ, whom we’re to imitate. But what is in view here is self-sacrifice. The giving that Paul has in mind for us to do involves sacrifice of some kind. We don’t give (whatever) out of our abundance; we give so generously that it’s a sacrifice. It involves loss. Christ humbled Himself and selflessly offered Himself as a sacrifice, giving Himself over to death, so as to bless us with salvation. That’s the selfless, sacrificial kind of giving we should be doing, if we’re a follower of Christ.

**“that there might be equality”** (v. 13). Paul would be horrified if he could see, today, how some suburban churches are extravagantly luxurious, magnificent balconied structures with theater-type individual soft seats, and orchestras and choirs, and other churches in the inner cities are just store-fronts, barely able to pay the rent. “Equality” within the Body of Christ should reflect our unity, that we’re all brothers and sisters in the Lord. It should reflect our love for each other.

**“a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given . . . for God loves a cheerful giver”** (Chapter 9, vv. 5b, 7b). God is Himself the standard for giving. He has been profligate giving to us, and we should understand from this verse that God is cheerful in all that He’s doing for us, the forgiveness of sins, the election, the adoption, and all else that goes with the Gospel. See Hebrews 12:2, **“Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame.”** Joy? Sure. God loves a cheerful giver because He himself is a cheerful giver – even though it cost him more than we can imagine. A gift grudgingly given is an unwilling gift, perhaps even one given resentfully. There’s no love in such a gift.

**“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously”** (v. 6). Sows? What this is all about is alien to most American church-goers. Christianity isn’t just passively attending church on Sunday mornings. God expects all believers in Christ – not just paid clergy – to be serving Him. Christianity is a life of carrying out God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures, such as evangelism, intercessory prayer, and acts of righteousness done in His name. That’s why Paul writes, **“you will abound in every good work”** (v. 8). We’re saved to do good works.

**“your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” and “many expressions of thanks to God”** (vv. 11b and 12b). The thanksgiving would be from the Judean believers who receive the gift. Those believers would understand that it was God who motivated the Gentile churches to make the gift. They would also therefore understand the unity of the church and end their sectarian attitude. Giving to others creates love-based unity. Why is it important to be thankful? Because only by being thankful can we fully understand what the gift is and why we needed it. Do we receive the gift of salvation with thankfulness? We certainly didn’t deserve it. Hey, do we realize that *everything* we have is a gift? **“What do you have that you didn’t receive?”** Paul asks in 1 Corinthians 4:7, expecting the correct answer, Nothing.

**“men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing . . .”** (v. 13b). The Jewish believers are the ones here who will praise God. OK. But let’s not miss what lies behind this idea. A believer in Christ, that is, anyone who holds to the Gospel, must be obedient to . . . to what or to whom? To Paul! We are to obey his teachings and his commands because of who he is, an Apostle. He speaks for the Lord. And once more, to nail it down, Paul adds that we’re to be not only people characterized by giving, but *generous* in giving. As God was overwhelmingly generous in giving to us.

**“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift”** (v. 15). The gift in view here is grace. It’s everything that God has done for us in Christ because of grace. With this conclusion, Paul reveals what these two chapters really are all about: God is the great Giver, and we’re to be just like Him. We give generously, cheerfully, selflessly, and sacrificially. Not just money. God didn’t give us money. God gave us Himself. So we do the same, we give of ourselves to God and to others.

The church in America is facing a severe crisis of faith. The problem is, we are not givers. Oh, of course we drop money into the plate or box at church on Sundays. But that’s not what giving is all about. Giving is this: We give ourselves to Christ, in weakness and humility, to do His will. In love, we regard ourselves as His slaves, here only to serve Him full time. We rejoice at opportunities to help others in need, and we do it as unto the Lord Himself. Our time, our energy, our resources, *our very lives*, are all given over to Him. We imitate Christ.