



Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 (with 5:14-15; 7:1)<sup>1</sup>

Series: Paul's Christmas Gospel

Title: Jesus, Born to Enrich

Date: December 20, 2009

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

Christmas touches our wallets. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that! But on the other hand, I do need to remind us of it. Why? Because Paul does. And what Paul tells us is that Christmas is to touch our wallets, not just on December 25, every day of the year. Charles Dickens actually made a good, Biblically sound point when he had Ebenezer Scrooge pledge to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come...

**“I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”**

But don't take Dickens' word for it. Listen to what Paul wrote to the believers in the city of Corinth 2000 years ago. As background to this piece of Paul's writing you need to know that Paul had been taking up a collection from several churches to help the poverty-stricken church in the city of Jerusalem. In this portion of his letter to the church in Corinth he appeals to them to take part in this offering.

As I read this passage of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, I want you to take special note of one word. It's the word, "grace." I'm only going to read nine verses but I want you to count the number of times Paul uses that wonderful word. "Grace" forms the foundation for Paul's financial appeal.

I am reading from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 1 to 9. Paul wrote ...

**<sup>1</sup> We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, <sup>2</sup> for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup> For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, <sup>4</sup> begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— <sup>5</sup> and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. <sup>6</sup> Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. <sup>7</sup> But as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you — see that you excel in this act of grace also.**

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**<sup>8</sup> I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.**

How many did you count? Four? Well, you're almost right. In this section there are actually five uses of the Greek word that is translated as "grace." In verse 4, where it tells us that the Macedonians were "begging ... for the favor" of taking part in the collection, the word translated as "favor" is exactly the same word translated as "grace" throughout the passage. These people were begging to be allowed to express the grace of giving.

This short section is full of grace and all of the grace that flows in and through his passage is rooted in the grace Paul highlights in verse 9. Let me read that one for us again. Here is Paul's Christmas Gospel of grace...

**"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." 2 Corinthians 8:9**

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ..." Do you? Everything hangs on your answer. Do you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Grace is God's gift to us of everything we need for life in the here and now and in eternity. And it all comes to us through our reception of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Two weeks ago we looked at Paul's Christmas Gospel in the Letter to the Galatians where he tells us that through faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, we have become members of God's family...

**"And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." Galatians 4:6-7**

Through faith in God's Son, we have been made heirs to a vast inheritance! God has given us access to an estate whose value is beyond human calculation. We have been freely given:

- Forgiveness of all our sins – all of them, forever!
- The promise of eternal life with God
- The continuing presence of God with us by His Spirit
- A home in heaven that is glorious beyond description
- A role to play in the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom
- Instant access through Jesus Christ into the audience hall of the universe where the eternal God hears our requests and answers us



- And we've been given so much more!

The moment we came to faith in Christ we were given access to God's stock of blessing and grace. We had no part in the accumulation of this estate; all of it has been gained for us by Jesus Christ through his sinless life and his atoning death. He did the work; we receive the grace.

In 1998 Paul McCartney's first wife, Linda, died of cancer. Paul McCartney, of course, was one of the Beatles and his marriage to Linda has been one of the most storied marriages in the world of pop culture. Paul and Linda had been married for 29 years. When McCartney married for a second time in 2002 to Heather Mills, he made a point in his engagement announcement of mentioning that there was no pre-nuptial agreement. In other words, the new Mrs. McCartney had access to his full estate of over 1 billion dollars without any legal limitation whatsoever.

McCartney chose to endow his new wife, as the wedding vows so beautifully declare it, with "all that I am and all that I have." Why? Because he loved her! Because she was his bride, not his "business partner." She was given access to his entire estate even though she hadn't had a hand in accumulating any of it.

Sadly, their marriage ended in divorce only four years later in 2006 and after two years of legal wrangling, Heather Mills was awarded a settlement in 2008 of approximately \$50 million dollars. She had originally asked for much, much more, but the court did not support her case.

Many of McCartney's peers thought him unwise to marry Mills without a pre-nuptial agreement. Given the high rate of divorce in the entertainment industry and the lawsuits over estates that arise from those divorces, many people today protect themselves from their spouses' potential abuse by putting legal limits in place even before the wedding. It can completely proper to establish a pre-nuptial agreement, especially when there is a need to guarantee the inheritance of children from a previous marriage. But McCartney chose not to do that. And I have to say, I take my hat off to him. He showed grace, even though the odds were against him. And in a similar way, God knows that our human natures are prone to grace-abuse, but he still offers his grace freely to us.

What is to stop us from abusing the grace of God to us? Nothing...except love.

It's natural to be concerned about abusing grace. If we really know ourselves, we know that we can easily take things for granted. **We tend not to highly value things that are free.**

Let me give you an example. One of the planning principles that I work with is that when you plan a small group or seminar, people will take their involvement seriously and benefit from it more IF they make a personal investment in the



event. For example, in **pre-marriage preparation**, I ask for a small fee from participants to cover some of the costs of the classes. By making that investment in the sessions, the couple have already indicated that they value what they are doing. If I made pre-marriage prep completely free, I'm afraid that couples would cancel classes and not take their homework seriously **because we tend not to highly value things that are free.**

**As human beings, we are motivated by the principle of “investment and reward.”** If I invest this, I get this return. It's a simple equation but we apply it to many aspects of life:

- In school – investing study results in better grades.
- In work – investing dedication results in promotion.
- In relationships – investing time results in depth.

But in responding to the free grace of God, this reality of human nature causes us some problems. God's gifts to us are outrageously out of proportion to our investment in them.

- God has given us an “A” in life when we deserve an “F.”
- God has given us a full-day's pay, even though we may only worked for an hour.
- God's blessings aren't rewards for accomplishing certain spiritual disciplines.
- We don't have to perform in order to receive His blessings.
- Jesus Christ has already won every blessing we receive for us on the cross.
- God's grace is completely free to us, at the cost of His Son's life.
- By our efforts, we can't make God love us more or bless us more.

So then, we ask ourselves: **“If my efforts won't earn me one blessing, then I'm afraid I'll slack off and stop doing the things I need to do to live a disciplined Christian life. How do I keep motivated? What keeps me from abusing God's gift of grace?”**

The Bible's teaching about grace is hard for us to accept. It runs against our grain. But the fact that it does is one of the proofs that this teaching must be from God.

Philip Yancey recounts the story of a meeting of a group of British academics that specialized in comparative religions. They were discussing the question: *What, if any, belief is unique to the Christian faith?* They eliminated some possibilities: *Incarnation?* Other faiths claimed that divine beings had taken human form. *Resurrection?* Other faiths claimed returns from the dead. The debate went on and got very lively. At one point the British evangelical scholar C.S. Lewis entered the room and he asked what all the commotion was



about. They posed the question to him: “What was the unique contribution of Christianity among the worlds’ religions?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Lewis responded. “It’s grace.”

After some discussion, they agreed. “The notion of God’s love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma ...the Muslim code of law – each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional.” (What’s So Amazing About Grace, p. 45)

The Bible recognizes the potential danger of abusing grace. The Apostle Paul wrote the entire sixth chapter of the Book of Romans to answer the question: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”

For the first five chapters of Romans, Paul built the argument that our right standing with God comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by human effort. We are locked in sin and incapable of doing anything that brings God’s approval and we are totally dependent on God’s mercy and grace. His argument culminates in this sweeping statement:

**“but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” Romans 5:20**

Paul realized that this unqualified presentation of the grace of God left him open to being misunderstood. He knew his readers could respond with this attitude: **“Well, if that’s true, let’s go out and sin all we want. The more we sin, the more we cause God’s grace to abound.”**

And so Paul framed the question in Romans 6:1:

**“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Romans 6:1**

This kind of response is always possible. In fact, as preachers of grace have discovered down through the centuries, if our preaching of grace DOESN’T carry this possibility, we probably haven’t preached grace!

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of the greatest Bible teachers of 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote of Romans 6, verse 1:

**“The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on**



***sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace.***” (As quoted in Bridges, Transforming Grace, p. 74)

And it’s exactly at this point that many sincere, Bible-loving Christians add their rules. We want to protect grace with rules and obligations and duties and requirements. And we destroy grace by doing so. We add to God’s amazing grace what makes sense to our minds – we want to earn it. But God wants to give it freely!

Paul answers his own question with these words:

**“By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Romans 6:2-4**

Jerry Bridges, the author of Transforming Grace, wrote:

“The solution to this problem is not to add legalism to grace. Rather, the solution is to be so gripped by the magnificence and boundless generosity of God’s grace that we respond out of gratitude rather than out of a sense of duty.” (Transforming Grace, p. 75)

Paul was gripped by the grace of God! “By no mean!” NO WAY! When we think of what God has done to save us from sin, “how can we live in it any longer?”

**So, how do we respond to grace? What is to be our motivation to live a responsible, God-honouring Christian life?**

We need to be gripped by something better than the fear of losing reward or the compulsion to earn our way. Instead of rules and regulations and obligations and duties, the Bible gives us motivations of grace that are to propel our lives forward into all that God has for us.

**First, we need to be gripped by the grace motivation of love**

**“For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” 2 Corinthians 5:14-15**

I use the word “gripped” intentionally. The word, “controls,” is a strong word. It literally means to “to hold together,” “to hold with” or “to hold fast.” Often this word is translated in the New Testament with a sense of coercion. It wouldn’t be



too wrong to say that Christ's love "coerces" us as long as we understand how love "coerces" people, but I prefer "to be gripped by."

When we're "in love" we are gripped with an urge that causes us to do crazy things to be with the one we love.

When I was dating Ruth, I lived in Ottawa and she lived north of Toronto. It was a drive of 3 or 4 hours. Nobody "coerced" me to make that drive, I was in the grip of love. I wasn't forced by any external authority or fear to make that trip – I wanted to be with her and so I made the drive.

The car I was driving at the time was an old Volkswagen beetle. It didn't have much of a muffler – so it was 4 hours of mind-numbing noise there and back, but I did it gladly. The car had some holes in the body – when I got home once, I was sick from carbon monoxide poisoning – but I didn't care! I was gripped by love!

Paul tells us that when we are gripped by the love of Christ for us, we will respond to that love by gladly surrendering our lives for him.

Numbers of times I've stood on this platform with a groom as he pledges his love to his bride for life before friends and family and before God. The Bible tells those new husbands what that their love is to look like:

**"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" Ephesians 5:25**

Christ's love for us was expressed in dying for us. Our love response to that love isn't a list of duties or obligations – **it's simply the response of a heart that's been loved to death!** We're overwhelmed with love, not obligation, and we respond in kind. We're "in the grip" of love. Augustine's counsel on living the Christian life is right. He said that the truth at the heart of living the Christian life is this...

**"Love God and do as you please."**

**Second, we need to be moved with the grace motivation of reverence**

**"Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." 2 Corinthians 7:1**

"The fear of God" is not a cringing, hiding, scuttling thing. It is a sense of the awesome holiness of God that translates into practical obedience to him. One of the most powerful motivations to live responsibly as a believer is the motivation



of reverence for the person of God. When we come to know Him as He is we find that He is worthy of our obedience.

In the Book of Genesis we read the story of Joseph who was tempted to commit adultery with the wife of his boss. When tempted by her, he responded,

**“How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” Genesis 39:9**

That’s motivation by reverence.

When I attended Briercrest Bible College it was a rule that students had to attend chapel every morning and church every Sunday morning. Failure to attend could result in “severe” consequences – the most feared consequence was the removal of dating privileges! Years of experience had sharpened the awareness of the staff about how to get the attention of students.

So I went dutifully to chapel and to church. But I remember one Thanksgiving Weekend very clearly. Most of the students had gone home for the weekend but I stayed behind on campus to do some work. During the holiday weekends, the rules about attendance were removed. I didn’t have to attend worship if I chose not to – but I went.

I can still remember the joy of worship that day. I don’t remember the sermon or the songs. I just remember the joy of worshipping the Lord because He was worthy of worship NOT because I was forced to worship because of the rules. I remember that I was motivated, not by fear of disapproval, but because I wanted to worship the One who alone is worthy of worship.

We often think that if we don’t make rules to enforce the grace of God, we’ll slide and fall. Brother and sisters, hear me clearly. I believe in regular worship. I believe in the practice of good spiritual habits. The Bible tells us we need them. But the motivation for nurturing our spiritual lives isn’t fear or obligation; it’s because we want to draw near to the One who has loved us and Who alone is worthy of reverence of our lives.

**Third, we need to be filled with the grace motivation of gratitude**

**“But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also. I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:7-9**



Jerry Bridges tells of a man he knew was a very strict tither. Tithing is the Biblical practice of giving a tenth of our income to the Lord for spiritual ministry. According to Bridges, this man gave exactly 10 percent of his income to the Lord, never one penny more, never one penny less.

One day, Bridges asked him why he tithed so religiously. He replied, "I'd be afraid not to." Did you catch those words? "I'd be afraid not to." What was his motivation? Although there might have been some joy in his giving, the predominant motive in his heart was fear. He was afraid that if he didn't obey, God would withhold some blessing from him or possibly something worse.

But Paul says that the motivation for our generous giving to the Lord is the Lord's example of self-giving for us. I think the best commentary on 2 Corinthians 8, verse 9 is found earlier in this letter when Paul wrote...

**"We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Corinthians 5:20-21**

He gave up the glory of heaven to come to earth to die for us so that we might enjoy the glory of heaven for eternity. He became sin for us; he took upon himself our sin so that he could offer himself to pay our death penalty for sin on the cross so that we might know the joy of forgiveness from sin. He endured separation from his Father on the cross for us so that we could know peace with God. His poverty made us rich.

What response is appropriate to this kind of giving? The giving of our lives ... and of our money, as it represents the work of our lives. That's Paul's focus in 2 Corinthians chapter 8.

During the Christmas season you have probably received a number of financial appeals from Christian ministries. Christmas coincides with the financial year end of many ministries. Some of these requests might lack a degree of Biblically-informed grace, but I think that vast majority comes to us with a deep knowledge of the "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." If our hearts have been gripped by the grace of God then we're going to find ourselves "begging" as the Macedonians did, for the "favor" of participating in these collections for the work of the Lord.

One ministry wrote to me saying...

*"December is both the month [in which this and other ministries depend] most heavily on God for financial support, and it is also the month we celebrate the*



*Incarnation. I doubt that this is coincidence. When the Son was 'born in the likeness of men' (Phil 2:7), we received a gift so immense that we have barely begun to grasp it. Without the Incarnation, there would be no death on a cross. No death, no forgiveness of our sins. We would be without God and without hope in this world (Eph 2:12). Without the Gift of Christmas, the immense cost of our redemption would go unpaid." (Desiring God ministries)*

And then, I was invited graciously and without fear or guilt inducements, to consider giving to help meet their financial need.

Another ministry also caught the spirit of what Paul wrote to Corinthians about grace-based gratitude giving. They wrote...

*"It's hard to ignore the cheerful tinkling of the Salvation Army bells at Christmastime ... there's something about the Christmas season that awakens our generosity. After all, God did not spare his own Son, but gave Him as a gift that first Christmas, and how can we not likewise show generosity to others?"*

By the way, I passed one of those Salvation Army kettles on Friday and was sad I didn't have anything in my pockets to give ... fortunately the one I was shopping with did!

The writer of this appeal did something I really appreciated. He pressed me. He reminded me of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and he very clearly told me not to take anything away from my giving to my church but then he said...

*"So what I ask you to do is consider giving to [this ministry] this Christmas season, giving sacrificially – over and above what you normally give. I'm not afraid to ask that of you because that's what Christians have always done in the most difficult times."*

That's what the Macedonians did...

**"in a severe test of affliction their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." 2 Corinthians 8:2**

He continued...

*"It's not that Christians somehow weathered storms like the Great Depression unscathed. Instead, they invited hungry neighbours to their table when they themselves were struggling. They did this because that is how Jesus taught us to live... As we give sacrificially, let's demonstrate to a watching world that there is a treasure that is dearer and better than anything this world treasures. It's the Lord Jesus Christ. Treasure him this Christmas by sharing your earthly treasure*



*with those who need it most.” (“Giving in Hard Times,” Chuck Colson, Breakpoint Dec 17, 2009, for Prison Fellowship ministry)*

Let me encourage you to receive these appeals from trusted ministries this Christmas season with a mind set on “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Allow the Lord to direct your response by his grace as you meditate upon his grace for you.

Love. Reverence. Gratitude. These are the motivations of grace. When we consider what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, what else can we do but give...

- Our love
- Our worship
- Our finances
- Our lives!

...at Christmas and all through the year.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Final Song:** Lord You Were Rich
- **Benediction**