

Stewardship and Mission

Devotional Reading: Zechariah 8:18–23

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 8:17–18; Acts 26:12–20;

2 Corinthians 8:1–15; 9:1–15

Today's Scripture: Acts 1:6–8; 2 Corinthians 8:3–9

I. Jesus and the Apostles

Acts 1:6–8

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

7 He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

6. After hearing Jesus' directive to remain in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4–5), the disciples *gathered around him* to ask the question we see here. They are convinced that he is the promised Messiah. Their question reflects the expectations of many first-century Jews regarding the timing and nature of the Messiah's task.

7. Jesus responds, but not in the way the disciples hope. He does not address their concern for Israel's restoration. Instead, Jesus tells them that they are not to be concerned with knowledge of *the times or dates* of such things. This privileged knowledge is for God *the Father* only. Earlier, Jesus exhorted the disciples to keep watch, but not to the point of becoming distracted by setting dates for his return. God is omniscient, meaning that he is all-

knowing, including knowledge of things hidden from human understanding.

8a. Jesus redirects the disciples' focus and highlights their unique task as they wait for his return. The Gospel of Luke ends with Jesus' command that the disciples remain in Jerusalem until they receive “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The verse before us moves from the abstract to the specific: the source of that *power* is to be *the Holy Spirit*. One cannot help but see parallels between Jesus' prediction here and the message of John the Baptist regarding a forthcoming baptism “with the Holy Spirit and fire” intimated by Jesus. Both messages echo events on the Day of Pentecost.

8b. The Holy Spirit's empowerment becomes the starting point for the church. The noun *witness* can be interpreted in at least two ways, depending on context. In one sense, the word *witness* refers to someone who has observed something—a spectator, observer, or eyewitness. In a second sense, the noun *witness* can refer to someone who testifies to something, as in a deposition. Jesus' disciples are already *witnesses* in the first sense, having seen firsthand his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. But now they are to be *witnesses* in the second sense as they take the gospel to *Jerusalem, . . . Judea, . . . Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*.

Many commentators note that this sequence outlines the gospel's geographic growth as recorded in the book of Acts. Peter first preaches the gospel *in Jerusalem* on the Day of Pentecost. The movement then expands into *Judea*, the region in which Jerusalem is located, and then to the region of *Samaria* to the north.

The phrase *ends of the earth* emphasizes that Jesus wants his disciples to take his message of salvation to all people and all the world. To do so would be a significant undertaking. Further, Jesus gave them no specifics regarding how they would work to complete this task. The instructions would come on an "as needed" basis. For the disciples and witnesses to follow through on this task, they must show each other care, hospitality, and financial generosity.

II. Paul and the Church

2 Corinthians 8:3–9

³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. ⁵ And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. ⁶ So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ 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 through his poverty might become rich.

3. To make his case to the church at Corinth that they should complete a fundraising initiative he started in 1 Corinthians, Paul presents the example of the churches of Macedonia. Macedonia is the region located directly north of Corinth, and it includes the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Achaia.

Paul does not give the specific financial amount offered by the Macedonian churches. Instead, he classifies their giving into two categories. First, their giving was *as they were able*, an amount to be expected. The second category, however, goes above and beyond the first: their giving was *beyond their ability*. This giving level reveals that God was at work in and through their sacrificial generosity.

Further, the fact that they were *entirely on their own* indicates that they gave without coercion from Paul. Their generosity was a free response to having received God's gift of grace.

4. Not only do the Macedonian churches give freely, but they also plead with Paul and his companions to receive the churches' generous financial gift. For believers in one area to provide aid to believers in other provinces is not without precedent (Acts 11:29–30).

The key theme in this verse and this chapter is the fellowship of God's people. This refers to a complete *sharing* of life with another and the unity God's people experience as they abide in Christ, receive God's gift of grace, and freely respond to that gift for the mission of the church. Similar terminology is used to describe the earliest life of the church in Acts 2:42–47. There, we see the believers worshiping, sharing meals, and providing for one another's needs.

One way to demonstrate unity and

fellowship among God's people is through financial giving. As believers experience unity, they are willing to meet the financial needs of others. In doing so, God's people embody Jesus' commands to follow him and care for other believers in Christ.

Both the recipients and the givers of the gift are *the Lord's people*.

5. Knowing the precarious situation of the Macedonians, Paul's *expectations* of their ability to give had been in line with that reality. Therefore, he is truly surprised by their overwhelming generosity—one that happened because *they gave themselves first of all to the Lord*. That initial commitment was not to the offering but to Christ. The Macedonians had experienced Christ's love and grace, which, in turn, led them to give their whole lives in service to him and to his people. Their commitment was both the prerequisite and motivating factor for their sacrificial giving to support the mission of the first-century churches. This level of commitment comes only by the *will of God*, as modeled by Jesus, who gave himself on the cross.

6. Having summarized the generosity of the Macedonian church, Paul now challenges his Corinthian readers. The challenge is based on the fact that the Macedonian churches have already finished their giving project, but the Corinthians have not.

A key player in helping the Corinthians do so is *Titus*, a "partner and co-worker" of the apostle Paul. He is mentioned by name 10 times in this book. Collecting funds for the poverty-stricken Jerusalem church seems to be a primary task for Titus.

Paul refers to the anticipated financial gift from the Corinthians as *this act of grace*. Their gift is not being coerced (more on this below). Instead, it will be their response of grace for having received the grace of God themselves.

7a. Paul has much to say elsewhere about *faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love*. Regarding just the Corinthians, we can list 1 Corinthians 1:5; 12:8; 13:1–2, 13; 14:6; and 16:1–2 on those topics.

7b. Even though the Corinthians excelled in several qualities, completing the offering was an opportunity for them to still *excel* in one more quality—*grace*. Growing in this regard involves the tangible grace of financial giving.

8. Regarding certain situations, the apostle Paul gives commands to the Christians in Corinth, and sometimes he merely advises. The imperative "See that you also excel in this grace of giving," just studied in 2 Corinthians 8:7b, seems like a command at first. But Paul hastens to ensure his exhortation is not misconstrued: *I am not commanding you*. Perhaps the clarification is because previously, he had been much more direct to them regarding their giving. Paul desires that the Corinthian believers be generous to other believers in need, but he wants the Corinthians to give out of cheerful love, not compulsion.

Paul notes the reason for his bringing up the example of the Macedonian churches. The Macedonians' *earnestness* in showing financial generosity was the occasion for him to use as an example to the Corinthians. If the Corinthians are similarly diligent, they will prove the *sincerity of their love*.

9. Paul appeals to the example of the *Lord Jesus Christ*. Before the incarnation, Jesus was rich in ways we cannot grasp. As the divine Son, he is equal with God from eternity. These eternal riches did not stop the divine Son from becoming a servant, humbling himself and becoming *poor* for the sake of humanity. Through his self-sacrifice, Jesus inaugurated the riches of the Father's salvation by making atonement for sin (Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 2:17).

Involvement Learning

Stewardship and Mission

Into the Lesson

Define *generosity*.

How have you experienced generosity from God?

In today's lesson, we will study the chain of generosity—one that begins with God in Christ Jesus and extends to all his followers.

Key Text

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.
—2 Corinthians 8:9

Into the Word

Read Acts 1:6–8 and imagine yourself as Jesus' first-century disciples. Write down a five-to-six-sentence testimony that recounts your time and experience as a "witness" to Jesus.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:1–5. List words in these verses that reflect the abundant and exceptional giving from the Macedonians.

Read 2 Corinthians 8:6–9. List the strengths that Paul recognized in the Corinthian church and why these are good qualities.

Why is Jesus' life an example of a generous life?

Into Life

List ways to practice generosity every day throughout the upcoming week.

Thought to Remember

Generosity is our response to God's grace.