



---

## POWER IN WEAKNESS | EXCELLING IN GRACE

November 9, 2025

---

We're in the midst of a series focused on the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and I have suggested that this letter is especially relevant to our times because of the current credibility crisis. Many people have lost trust in the Church and its leaders for a number of understandable reasons. But that's what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times. Because as we've seen over the last several weeks, the Apostle Paul faced a credibility crisis as well, specifically with respect to the church that he founded in the Greek city of Corinth. After Paul founded the church, there was a group of people who slipped in, and they were trying to discredit Paul and turn the church against him. But the way in which Paul responds provides us with a model for how to handle our own challenges in our own day with integrity, even when under pressure.

One area that causes many people to be disillusioned with the Church or with its leaders is how Christians handle money. I won't name names, but I'm sure you've all heard stories like this one. There was one prominent pastor who was described as using private jets like Ubers. An independent investigator discovered that he had used \$150,000 of church funds to pay for a vacation for just four people. He also used church funds to buy a \$6,500 Cartier watch, \$2,500 on Louis Vuitton luggage, and my personal favorite, \$16,000 on custom skateboards. So there you go.

When we hear stories like this, it erodes trust and it makes us cynical. It might even make us angry. You might say, see, this is what has always turned me off to Christians. Christians say that they're committed to love, to humility, to generosity, to forgiveness, to self-sacrifice... but it's all a sham. They're really just in it for themselves. They are just greedy for more money, more power, more influence. They selfishly use their money for themselves, and if they do give it away, well, it's just used as an attempt to impress people, or to make people like them, or perhaps even worse, they use it to manipulate and control people to get them to do what they want.

So what should we say to all that? Well, the critics have a point. We should be concerned about how Christians — especially church leaders — use money. It's a real problem. I would also add that Christianity carries within itself a self-correcting mechanism, which is the gospel itself. And that becomes especially clear in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. Here Paul shows us how the gospel transforms the way that we view money, resources, and the practice of generosity. But this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is not at all what you might expect. Because here's the first surprise: Paul's opponents in Corinth were not accusing him of misusing money, but of refusing it.

See, what you need to understand is that the first century world of Paul's day was based on a patronage system. So a wealthy patron or benefactor might give money

or resources to artists, to philosophers, to teachers. You could think of Lorenzo de' Medici becoming a patron of Michelangelo during the Renaissance. Now, my guess is there are probably some artists here today who are looking for a patron. But don't get sidetracked; that's not the point of the sermon. The point is that in the first century, this patronage system had strings attached.

So a wealthy benefactor might give money or resources, but what do they expect in return? Well, they expected absolute loyalty and fawning public praise. But unlike the opponents of Paul — the so-called “super apostles” who were more than happy to receive the largesse of these Corinthian benefactors — Paul refused to take any money from them. Instead, he worked with his own hands. He supplied for himself by tentmaking. He was willing to receive funds from another church like the church in Philippi that supported his mission in Corinth, but he didn't want to be a burden to the Christians in Corinth, so he refused to take any money from them.

Now this was offensive to some. It felt like a slap in the face, because he was overturning social expectations. But Paul was very deliberate in his actions. He was very intentionally trying to turn that whole patronage system upside-down. What he reveals is that the true patron, our true benefactor, is God himself. And the way we respond to gifts is not obligation to a patron but rather gratitude to God. True Christian giving is not a matter of seeking honor or control for oneself, but rather it's a matter of reflecting God's own selfless generosity into the world. In other words, Christian giving is not about self-promotion but about self-giving.

As we turn to 2 Corinthians 8, we'll see that this passage is all about money. But interestingly, Paul never uses the word money. Instead, he speaks of grace. He calls the Corinthians — and he calls us, by extension — to excel in this act of grace. So during our time together today, I'd like us to consider three things: 1) *The form of grace*, 2) *The need for grace*, and 3) *The source of grace*. In other words, what is this grace, why do we need it, and how do we get it?

<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.

<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. <sup>10</sup>And in this matter I give my judgment: this benefits you, who a year ago started not only to do this work but also to desire to do it. <sup>11</sup>So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your

completing it out of what you have. <sup>12</sup>For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have.

## *2 Corinthians 8: 1-12*

### **The Form of Grace**

First, let's consider the form of grace. Beginning in verse 1, Paul says, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia." Most likely he's referring to the churches that he planted in Philippi, Thessalonica, and perhaps Berea in the north of Greece. Now, grace is one of the most important words in the Christian vocabulary. It's a word you'll hear me speak probably more than any other. And the word grace usually is used to refer to God's undeserved, unmerited love and power which he lavishes upon people in order to not only bring them to faith but also cause them to live and grow as Christians. But here, Paul uses the word grace not simply to refer to what God does for us, but to refer to what God does *through* us. God's grace was given to the Macedonian Christians, and it led them to give away their money in radical proportions despite their own poverty — so much so that they became famous for their love for the poor.

Here's the background and context. At the beginning of Paul's ministry, he met with some of the earliest Christian leaders centered in Jerusalem — Peter, James, and John — and together they agreed that Paul's mission would be to carry the message of the gospel to the Gentiles, to the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world, while they would focus on ministering to Jewish believers in and around Jerusalem. The only thing they asked Paul was to remember the poor — the one thing he said that he was already eager to do.

And so from the very outset of his ministry, Paul made it his aim to organize a collection for the impoverished Christians who were living in Jerusalem, who were suffering as a result of both famine and persecution. So when he first goes to Macedonia and plants those churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea, he encourages them to start setting aside money on a weekly basis every time they gather together for worship in order to provide for this collection for the saints — all those impoverished Christians living in and around Jerusalem.

But what's especially significant here is that Paul tells us that these Macedonian Christians were themselves desperately poor. They too had suffered severe persecution, and it's very possible that the poverty and persecution went together. Perhaps the reason why they were so destitute was because they were persecuted and therefore lost their jobs and lost their source of income. Yet Paul says in verse 2, despite their severe affliction, "their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part." In verse 3, Paul goes on to say, not only did they give according to their means, but they even gave beyond their ability. In other words, they gave sacrificially.

There's only one explanation for this radical generosity. It could not be anything other than an act of grace. In fact, if you look carefully at verse 4, the word that is translated as favor is literally the word "grace" once more. Verse 4 says they were "begging us

earnestly” for the grace, for the gift, for the privilege, for the favor of being able to take part in the relief of the saints. They begged for the opportunity.

So what can we learn from these Macedonian Christians? Well, if you’re interested, back in June I gave a two-part sermon series entitled *The Gift of Generosity* in which we looked at Christian giving in a more detailed and a more practical way. So I would commend that series to you. But there, and here, we find the same themes. Because what do we learn from the Macedonian Christians? Well, they gave joyfully, not begrudgingly. They gave systematically, not haphazardly. And they gave sacrificially, not selfishly.

First of all, Paul tells us that they gave joyfully, not begrudgingly. No one was forcing them to do this. They gave out of an abundance of joy, not guilt. Secondly, they gave systematically, not haphazardly. They put thought into it. They had to plan ahead. They put aside money each week when they gathered for worship. They gave according to their means — they gave according to what they had, not according to what they didn’t have.

But not only did they give joyfully and systematically; they gave sacrificially, not selfishly. Paul says that they not only gave according to their means but even beyond their means. And you see, most likely these three have to go together. In order to give sacrificially, we also have to give joyfully and systematically. Sometimes we might give spontaneously in the spur of the moment, and it might be heartfelt, but it might not actually be sacrificial. And all kinds of studies have shown that people would give two to four times more if they planned it out over time rather than giving once in the spur of the moment.

So we’re called to give like they did: joyfully, systematically, sacrificially. And therefore, the Macedonian Christians invite us to ask ourselves, as we look at our own hearts, are we so moved by the grace that we have received through the gospel that we would beg for opportunities to give more — beg for opportunities to participate in the relief of the saints? What this all shows us is that the work of God’s grace in our hearts turns tight fists into open hands. This is what happens when a heart is warmed — when a heart is lit up by the fire of the gospel. So that’s the form of this grace. In this particular letter, grace takes visible form in radical sacrificial generosity.

## **The Need for Grace**

But that leads me to my second question: Why do we need it? Why do we need this grace? And the answer is that if we do not kindle the flame of the gospel in our hearts, our hearts very likely will grow cool. Our hearts might grow cold over time. And you see, that’s what happened to the Christians in Corinth. The Christians in Macedonia, in the north of Greece, are examples of this radical, sacrificial generosity; but the Christians in Corinth, though they started out well, saw their hearts cool and their enthusiasm wane.

In verse 10, Paul comments that one year prior to the writing of this letter, they started to do this work. And not only that, they desired to do it. They were all in. So they started with enthusiasm, but then that enthusiasm began to wane. Their

generosity stalled. You could think about trying to fire up the engine on your car. It might start up right away, but then it stalls out. So that's what happened. Their generosity started out well, but then it waned over time.

So now Paul says that they should finish strong. In verse 11, he encourages them to complete their task. And that's why Paul had previously sent his trusted colleague, Titus. Titus delivered the correspondence from Paul to the church in Corinth, not only to deliver the mail, but also to provide them with instructions about how to renew their commitment to this collection. He says in verse 6, "Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace." So let's ask ourselves, why might the generosity of these Christians in Corinth have stalled out over time?

Well, if you know anything about the church in Corinth based on, for example, 1 Corinthians, you know that this was a church that boasted in possessing dramatic, attention-seeking spiritual gifts. The Christians in Corinth seemed to display supernatural power and perhaps spiritual superiority because they prided themselves in their spectacular gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy, and that's why Paul seems to be chastising them a little bit in verse 7. He says, look, you people are very gifted spiritually. You boast in your spiritual gifts. "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.

What Paul's suggesting here is that this is a discipleship issue. If you want to be a fully formed follower of Jesus then you need to cultivate the grace of giving. Essentially, Paul is calling the Christians in Corinth bobblehead dolls. You know bobblehead dolls: an enormous oversized head that seems to completely overshadow an almost non-existent body. And Paul is saying that the Christians in Corinth have become people that have big heads but no heart. Their spirituality has gone to their heads. They're boasting in their supernatural gifts, their spiritual insights and experiences. Their head has grown really big, but their heart is lagging behind. They've got big heads but very little heart.

And he says, if you want to mature and grow as a Christian in a balanced rather than a lopsided way, see to it that you excel in this act of grace. Display generosity even to churches that you may never visit. This is one of the underappreciated but steady themes throughout all of Paul's letters. See, we may be accustomed to thinking that Christians are responsible for caring for their own, for providing for their own local congregation. But what Paul insists is that while that's true, we also have a financial responsibility to provide for other churches in other places when they're in need. And why is that? Because, he says, we are the body of Christ. We belong to one another.

What Paul is challenging is a parochial mindset that focuses just on taking care of our own. And what he wants to instill within us is a kingdom of God mindset. We belong to the kingdom of God, and we're called, therefore, to participate in all God's kingdom work, wherever we have the opportunity and wherever there's a need. And that's why this collection for the Saints in Jerusalem was so important to Paul. In fact, it was triply important, because for Paul, this collection was all about demonstrating the unity of the early church. Because through this collection, Christians were



demonstrating the ways in which God breaks barriers — geographical barriers, class barriers, and ethnic barriers.

Just think about it. First, this collection bridged a geographical divide. Paul started raising funds from churches like this one in Corinth, even though Corinth was located 800 miles away from Jerusalem. These two sets of Christians were never going to meet one another. They were never going to visit one another's churches. And yet Paul says that we belong to one another.

Secondly, this collection bridged the socioeconomic divide. The Christians in Jerusalem and the Christians in Macedonia were destitute. They were poor. But not the Christians in Corinth. No, they were relatively well off. Why? Because they were living in the equivalent of New York City in the Mediterranean world. Corinth was a massive commercial hub, and so the Christians in Corinth were relatively well off. So he's encouraging them to give to those who didn't have the same means that they did, and that was another way of demonstrating the unity of the church.

But then finally, this collection bridged an ethnic divide because the Christians based in Jerusalem were, for the most part, Jewish believers, whereas the Christians in cities like Corinth were, for the most part, Gentiles — Greek-speaking believers. The Gentiles reaped the spiritual blessing of the gospel because the gospel came from the Jews, and therefore Paul says it's only fitting that these Jewish Christians should now share in the material blessings of these Gentile Christians in Corinth.

So through this collection, Paul is demonstrating the unity of the church across geographical, socioeconomic, and ethnic divides because we belong to one another. Now, the Corinthian Christians, they lagged in their zeal over time, but not the Christians in Macedonia. If you had asked those Christians up in the north of Greece, "What does a church in Jerusalem have to do with you?" they would've said "everything." It has everything to do with us. The main idea here is that we are blessed to be a blessing. That grace received becomes grace released — grace released out into the world.

And what you need to know is that this is an important part of our own story here at Central. You probably wouldn't have guessed it by looking around now, but 20 years ago, this church was essentially dead. It had dwindled to next to nothing. Believe it or not, Central once owned the townhouse right next door on Park Avenue as well as the three townhouses next door on 64th Street. During the '70s and '80s, as a result of incredible financial mismanagement, the leaders here at that time sold all four of those properties and then found a way to spend all of the money they received so that by the early 2000s, this church was completely broke. They didn't even have the money to pay the electric bill in 2002, and the building had been left to fall into massive disrepair. It was wrapped in scaffolding, not because work was being done, but simply to keep stone from hitting people on the head as they walked by.

But when the gospel was restored to this church, by God's grace, it came bursting back to new life. We knew that we had to fix up this building in order to function as a launchpad for mission into the city and beyond. But the church had no money. The church at that time was small. And given the youthfulness of the congregation (similar

to what we see in our church now), there's no way we would've raised the money necessary to restore this building. Now by God's grace, we eventually raised over \$25 million to fix it up. But what you need to know is that 75% of those funds came from not only outside of our congregation but from outside of New York City. Christians literally from all over the country believed in the mission, and therefore they gave generously in order to ensure that Central could function as a beacon of hope in the middle of New York City.

But why did these Christians all over the country give to this church? Some of them have never met you. You'll never meet them. Some of them have never visited this church. They have no intention of visiting. Some of them hate New York City. They're not coming. So why did they give so generously? Well do you know what some of them told me? The reason why was because of 2 Corinthians 8. It was all because of this passage. That was the passage that was eye-opening for them, where they realized that if we belong to the kingdom then we belong to one another, and if we have the means to help, then we're going to do so. They almost begged for the opportunity to give.

And now we're the recipients of that. Of course, there's still a little bit of work left to do on the building. (If you want to help with that, let me know...) But now that the building has been mostly restored, it's our responsibility to fund the ministry that flows out of this building and to pay it forward. We're blessed to be a blessing. Grace received becomes grace released back out into the world.

And so the ways in which we're seeking to pay it forward — the ways in which we're trying to remember the poor — are by supporting our designated ministry partners like the Bowery Mission, Safe Families for Children, Avail, RUF, YoungLife, Focus, and like our own initiative, Reading Buddies. We're trying to pay it forward by supporting a new church plant led by Jay Harvey. He's planting a church called City on a Hill in Midtown. I'd encourage you to find ways to support him and be part of that work.

We're also trying to pay it forward through the launching of Resound Project. We founded Resound Project in 2021 to mark the 200th anniversary of the church. The vision of Resound is to think creatively about how we can share people and ideas, relationships and resources to help strengthen other churches in other places, regardless of their geographical location, church size, or denominational affiliation. Together, we're trying to help strengthen the Church for a changing world so the gospel might resound to the next generation. We're blessed to be a blessing.

## **The Source of Grace**

We've considered the form of grace. What is grace? It takes the form of radical, sacrificial generosity. And why do we need this grace? Because, left to ourselves, our natural tendency is to allow our hearts to grow cool. Our generosity might dry up and stall out. And if that's the case, then the last question we need to ask ourselves is, how do we get it? How do we get this grace? And in order to get it, we have to go back to the source, who is Jesus himself.

If you remove a coal from a fire, that coal by itself will slowly cool. The only way for that coal to turn white hot again is if you place it next to the other coals and fan the

flames. In a similar way, if we find that our heart has grown cool toward God and toward his grace toward us, then we need to place ourselves near the fire of the gospel of grace so that our hearts once more might be inflamed with gratitude. This passage in 2 Corinthians 8 provides perhaps the most beautiful and the most evocative way of expressing that. I love verse 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 by his poverty might become rich.”

Briefly consider what this little verse tells us about who Jesus is, what he did, and why it matters. Who is Jesus? Jesus is rich. Rich beyond all measure. Rich beyond all imagining. Rich in divine glory. Rich in eternal fellowship with the Father. He is the one and only Son, the second person of the trinity. He had it all. The whole universe was his to command. And what did Jesus do? He gave it up. “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.” He was born into straw poverty. The one who had the riches of the universe became poor — not only by becoming a human being, not only lowering himself to the point of assuming the position of a servant, but he humbled himself all the way to the cross, by dying a horrific death on the cross. And as a result, Jesus shows us that his story was not rags to riches but riches to rags. He pursued a life of downward mobility. And why did he do it? He did it for you. He did it for me. So that we might become rich.

By simple trust in who Jesus is and what he’s done for us, we become heirs — co-heirs with Christ — of all the riches of the gospel. The moment that you put your faith in Jesus, everything that is his becomes yours. Everything that is true of him becomes true of you. So now, through faith in Christ, you are forgiven, you are cleansed, you are loved, you are adopted. You are now a beloved child of God.

And as a result of that, God loves you with the same love and to the same degree that he loves his one and only Son. He no longer treats you as your guilty record deserves; he now treats you as Jesus’ perfect record deserves. Do you realize what that means? It means that there is absolutely nothing you could do to ever make God love you less, but there’s also nothing you could ever do to make God love you more. He already loves you infinitely and perfectly in his Son. “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.” See, when you stoke the fire of his love, that’s when you respond with radical, sacrificial generosity.

So let me conclude by telling you a brief little story about a woman from our church named Mary Di Carlo Andronaco, who died this past year. Mary was born in Boston. At the tender age of 17, she became a Sister of Charity in Nova Scotia. She taught elementary aged children for 15 years as a nun until being released from her vows, after which she spent the next 49 years teaching at the Dalton School here in New York as a beloved teacher within the First Program.

Around 2015, Mary began to wrestle with her relationship with God. She had doubts and she had questions. She knew that something was missing — something critical, something necessary — but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. A friend encouraged her to come to Central, but she said, “Well, I can’t do that. I’m a Catholic. I’ve never been to a Protestant church in my life.” But her friend persisted, and so she relented, and in



her own words, she said it was the greatest concession she ever made, because coming to Central changed her life.

Soon after that, she wrote me an email and asked if we could get together because she wanted me to explain the gospel of grace one more time, in person, in detail. She explained that she had grown up with a meritorious understanding of one's relationship with God. So she said, "Explain it to me again. What is this grace?" And I said, "Well, religion tells you if you live this way, then God will love you and accept you. But the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God loves you and accepts you, and now he calls you to live this way, not as a way to try to win his love, but as the demonstration that you already have it." Afterward, she wrote me a note saying that now, finally, for the first time, she felt completely, absolutely enveloped by the love of God. She suggested that she would spend the rest of her life reflecting on grace — and that is precisely what she did up to her dying day.

But you see, this grace that penetrated deep into her heart and life reflected itself out in the form of radical, sacrificial generosity. She's the one person in all my 20 years of ministry whom I had to instruct to stop giving to the church — because she was giving away far too much! As she approached the end of her life, she really wasn't taking good care of herself. And I said, "Mary, you've got the money. You have to take better care of yourself." And she did a little bit, but she was very resistant. Because if you knew Mary, you knew that she was incredibly stubborn. She refused to spend her money on herself. You know why? Because she wanted to save as much as she could so that when she died, she could give it to this church.

As a former nun and a lifelong kindergarten teacher, she left a surprisingly sizable amount to Central when she died, and she wanted it to be used to keep this building beautiful. Why did she do that? Why did she want to keep this building beautiful after we had fixed it up? Because she wanted it to be a gift to you. She wanted to give primarily to keep the building beautiful simply so that when you give, you can give primarily to fund the ministries of this church that flow out of this building — those ministries that had changed her life forever. She didn't want your funds to have to be used to fix a boiler or a broken window. She wanted you to be able to give to fuel the ministry of the gospel.

You see, the thing about Mary is that she never got over it. She never got over the depth of Jesus' love for her, and it meant that grace was released out from her life into the world around us. May we, like Mary, never get over it. Let us never get over the depth of Jesus' love for us. And then in response, let's see to it that we excel in this act of grace by demonstrating radical, sacrificial generosity for Jesus' sake.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father God, we thank you for the truths that we celebrate — that Jesus, though he had all the riches in the world, gave everything up for us and became poor, so that through his poverty — a poverty that we will never know, experience, or taste — we might become truly rich as heirs of the gospel. Kindle the flame of grace in our hearts so that we too might be people who are marked by radical, sacrificial generosity. In Jesus' name. Amen.*