

THE LOOKOUT

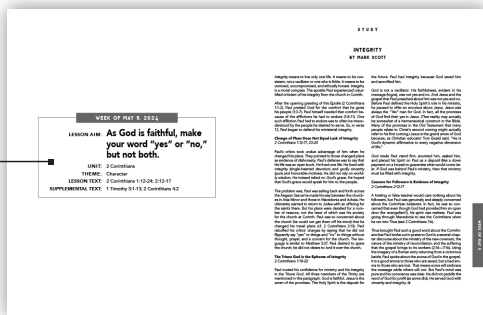
MAY 2024

Unit: 2 Corinthians Theme: Character

Overview: We move from a study of 1 Corinthians to a study of 2 Corinthians. Scholars debate how many letters were written to this troubled church (1 Corinthians 5:9; 2 Corinthians 2:3-4, 9; 10:9-10). But the completed canon of the New Testament includes these two. The word *troubles* could be used to summarize 1 Corinthians. Second Corinthians could be summarized with the word *character*. Someone said, "Reputation is what others think of you; character is what you really are." Paul did not have the best reputation, but he did have outstanding character; his character is on display in 2 Corinthians. Students will learn that integrity, perseverance, hope, and generosity are key qualities of character.

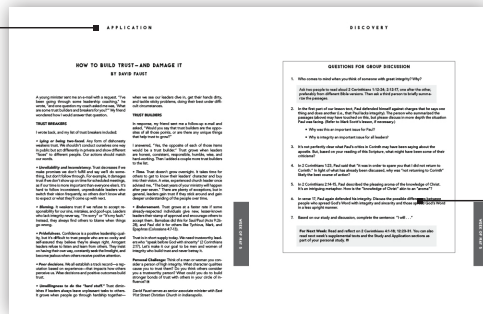
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF MAY 26, 2024

LESSON AIM: **“Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”**

UNIT: 2 Corinthians

THEME: Character

LESSON TEXT: 2 Corinthians 8:1-12; 9:6-15

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 112:5-9; Matthew 6:1-4; Luke 6:38;
James 2:14-17

STUDY

GENEROSITY

BY MARK SCOTT

Seth Wilson, Ozark Christian College's founding academic dean, said, "I shovel it [offerings] out, and God shovels it in, and God has a bigger shovel." God provides for his children to be generous (Psalm 37:25; Philippians 4:19). Happy people typically are generous people. Many have found that they cannot afford to be stingy.

Second Corinthians 8-9 is the largest stewardship of giving passage in the Bible. After the rich discussion about the ministry of the gospel (2:14—7:16), Paul launched into this major teaching about giving.

The Examples of Generous Giving

2 Corinthians 8:1-12

Paul used two examples in this text to encourage the Corinthians to be generous in their giving. One example was that of the Macedonian churches (i.e., Philippi and Thessalonica). Some people are uncomfortable with using other people's examples for greater stewardship, but Paul seemed content to do so.

Paul affirmed that the Macedonian churches had excelled in *this grace of giving*. In fact, at the heart of giving is the grace of God. For grace not only saves and equips; it also motivates. The word *grace* occurs four times in this text. When God gives his grace, the recipients should be gracious. The unusual part of this was that the Macedonian churches were evidently not wealthy. They were in *severe trial* (testing afflictions) and *extreme poverty* (deep poorness).

Amid such dire circumstances, however, these churches had *overflowing joy* which *welled up in rich generosity*. They gave beyond their *ability* (power) and *exceeded Paul's expectations*. They even *pleaded* (begged) for the privilege of giving—that's different. Paul almost seemed surprised by their total commitment that went beyond just giving money.

Another example of generous giving was Jesus himself. Verse 9 offers a classic description and explanation of the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ. Jesus was *rich* in glory with his Father, but due to his love, he *became poor* (came to earth). His poverty brought about our rich inheritance in heaven. This was at the heart of Christ's emptying of himself spoken of in Philippians 2:5-11.

These two examples served Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to follow through on their commitments for the Judean saints. They had *made a beginning*, but now they needed to complete it. Paul leaned on them by reminding them of their other qualities (faith, speech, knowledge, earnestness, and love). He pleaded with them to finish their work since they had responded positively to the initial appeal. Their gift was to be in proportion to what they had—not what they did not have.

The Fruit of Generous Giving

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Giving helps in at least two ways. It helps the needy, obviously, but it also helps the giver. (Do you remember when Tevya thanked Perchik for the privilege of giving him some cheese in *Fiddler on the Roof*?) Paul did not lack for employing great principles for the churches in his Epistles. One would be the Law of Harvest—that we reap what we sow. Another one is in this text. If one sows *sparingly* one *will also reap sparingly*. Likewise, generosity begets generosity.

Giving will bear its best fruit when it is not done *reluctantly or under compulsion* (that is, regretfully and out of a sense of duty). It is at its apex when it is done cheerfully (the English word *hilarious* come from this Greek word). One fruit of generous giving is how it blesses the giver. The giver is promised everything that is needed. Paul employed Psalm 112:9 as proof of his point. The poor are blessed, and the righteousness of the giver *endures forever*.

God, who knows something about being generous, enables his church to be generous. Paul employed an agrarian example to make his point. God gives seed to the sower; later, the reaper harvests the crop and makes it into bread (i.e., righteousness). God inspires generosity that allows more giving to take place in the future and results in thanksgiving to God.

Therefore, if the Corinthians will get on board with their pledge, Paul said, the Lord's people everywhere will thank and praise God. In addition to that, the Corinthians' obedience to this giving will demonstrate evidence of their genuine confession in the gospel. This will bear the fruit of evangelistic possibilities. How fitting that Paul ended this section with a grand doxology: "*Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.*" ■

APPLICATION

FIRST GIVE YOURSELF

BY DAVID FAUST

The apostle Paul commended first-century Christians who lived in the Greek province of Macedonia because they “gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us” (2 Corinthians 8:5). Those Macedonian disciples modeled an important truth. Before giving anything else to God, we first should give him ourselves—our bodies and brains, buildings and bucks, burdens and blessings, budgets and bank accounts. The Lord is the ultimate owner of everything we possess.

Obviously, Jesus’ followers should be generous. But the Lord advocated a level of commitment and sacrifice that goes far beyond token giving. He called his disciples to “deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). When you’re carrying a cross, there’s no room in your hands for anything else.

The way of Christ isn’t merely to put yourself last, but to give yourself first. God doesn’t need your money; but if you give him your heart, your money will come along.

The Results of Generosity

Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:38). Getting in return isn’t the *reason* to give, but it’s often the *result* of giving. We shouldn’t give because of what we get out of it; but it really is “more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). What will happen if you give yourself first to the Lord?

Your giving will surpass what you could do by human strength alone. The Macedonian Christians “gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability” (2 Corinthians 8:3).

Generosity leads to spiritual growth. Giving makes us more grateful. It helps us get our priorities straight and put God’s kingdom first. It makes us more merciful toward others in need, and more mindful of heavenly

things. Paul urged, “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” (8:7).

Giving allows us to imitate the example of Christ. He gave more than money; he gave himself. “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” (8:9).

If you give yourself away first, you will find greater joy in giving away other things. “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Selfless generosity opens a conduit to other blessings from God, which you can use to serve him. Notice Paul’s expansive use of the words *all* and *every* in these verses:

“And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in *all* things at *all* times, having *all* that you need, you will abound in *every* good work. . . . You will be enriched in *every* way so that you can be generous on *every* occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (9:8, 11, emphasis added).

Generosity isn’t mainly about money. It starts with an attitude of loving surrender that says, in the words of the songwriter, “Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.”

Personal Challenge: Before you give another dollar to the church or another charitable cause, pause and pray: “Lord, I give myself to you. Help me to love you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love my neighbors as myself. Then, out of a loving heart, let me give generously and cheerfully to honor you.” **L**

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Tell about someone who was so generous that they leap from your memory.

Ask two people to read aloud **2 Corinthians 8:1-12; 9:6-15**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. Many if not most preachers have historically been reluctant to preach about generosity in giving to the church.

- What are some reasons a minister might be hesitant to preach about giving?
- How do you personally respond to a sermon about generosity?

3. Paul had previously encouraged the Corinthians to set aside some money weekly to be shared with God's people in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:2-3). In this way, a larger, one-time collection would not be necessary—but Paul's advice evidently had not been followed.

- Identify some of the persuasive techniques and gentle arguments Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 8:1-12 to try to convince the Corinthians "what is best for you in this matter" (v. 10). Which of them is the most effective?

4. How does giving and generosity help both the receiver and the giver?

- Why is our attitude in giving of key importance? (For example, giving in a cheerful manner rather than out of a sense of duty?)
- How will we be affected in the long run if we give grudgingly rather than with God-honoring motives?

5. In his lesson Application, David Faust writes, "The way of Christ isn't merely to put yourself last, but to give yourself first. God doesn't need your money; but if you give him your heart, your money will come along."

- How has God the Father's example and Jesus' example served to encourage your own generosity?

6. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Daniel 1:1-21** as we begin a unit on the Old Testament prophet with the theme, "Revealer of Mysteries." You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■