



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 5
June 27, 2021

Out of Poverty, Grace

2 Corinthians 8:1-9, 13-15

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

⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. 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.

¹² For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³ For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, “Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.”

Theodora got married at the ripe old age of 19. Well, it *was* old according to the culture in which she lived. If she had waited another year, she would have been considered a spinster. I mean, who waits until they’re in their 20s to get married? So was the thinking in her day.

What brought the delay? When the vast majority of young women were married at the age of 17, what caused Theodora to wait so long? It was certainly not due to any undesirability on her part; she was quite lovely and had a very kind and caring nature. She also had a handsome dowry, so she wouldn’t be considered a financial burden by her suitors. And suitors there were.

But Theodora was the eldest of three sisters. When she was 15, her parents were tragically killed when the right front wheel of the carriage in which they were riding suddenly came off and they crashed. The driver had been able to leap to safety, but when he was finally able to catch up to the wreckage, he found Theodora’s parents dead inside, their bodies entangled with each other and their necks broken. They had been the kind



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of parents to lavish their love on their children. It was a severe loss to Theodora and her sisters, as the outpouring of love to which they were accustomed was so suddenly and finally cut off.

Though the girls were placed under the supervision of their aunt and uncle, it was really Theodora who was like a mother to them. Heartbroken over the loss of her parents, she found consolation in caring for her siblings. The love which had flowed between her and her parents was now added to that which she had for her sisters. They became almost the sole focus of her affections and they were equally disposed toward her.

But just at the age when young women usually took husbands, all three sisters contracted cholera. Theodora was the only one to survive. The blow was devastating, as she was again deprived of her primary outlet for sharing the love that poured from her kind and generous heart. It took nearly a year for her to recover from her illness; it took much longer for her to recover from losing her sisters. In a sense, she never did.

When at last she married, it was to a man 10 years her senior, a bachelor who, instead of romance, had spent his youthful energy in business. He had become quite successful and content in his singleness. But it had been pressed upon him by his parents that it was high time for him to take a wife, and if he ever hoped to receive the kind of legacy he expected, he had better start producing grandchildren. Having been introduced to Theodora through her aunt and uncle, a brief courtship was begun. In time her hand was asked and given.

Their marriage, however, was never the kind that most young people hope for, certainly not what Theodora had hoped for. He was always cool toward her, often indifferent. But within a year or so his indifference grew to condescension. He belittled her skills as a homemaker, never cared for her cooking, and complained of her performance in the bedroom. At first this treatment was reserved for the privacy of their own home, but when it became increasingly apparent that Theodora could not bear him children, his insults and harsh treatment extended to public gatherings and people began to talk.

And as they talked, more and more of his escapades with other women peppered the conversation. Theodora learned to interpret his moods, which were often based on his success, or lack thereof, in pursuit of other women; when he was successful, he was carefree and jovial; when not, well, her body bore the marks of his ill temper.

It was an extremely challenging life for Theodora. Brimming with a capacity for love, yet deprived of a suitable outlet, and being unwilling to engage in any nefarious or unscrupulous outlets, her love was largely unspent, save for that which she still carried for her departed loved ones – her parents and siblings. There was, of course, her aunt and uncle, but they were not demonstrably affectionate even between themselves. Theodora despaired of ever again being able to share the great love brimming over in her heart.

Eventually, her husband's latest fling became pregnant and he sued for divorce. Theodora did not fight him in this. She already felt alone. She might just as well be alone.



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Now, at age 22, she was truly a spinster. Feeling hopeless and without recourse, she fell for a time into deep despair. There was a point at which she thought she could actually feel her love dying on the vine.

But, after a period of some months, an idea began to grow in her – a plan for escaping her emotional poverty. Through careful consideration and prayer, she chose to enter the field of nursing, recalling the blessings she and her sisters had received during their great illness. This was just the ticket. Now there was no shortage of people to love. Daily she poured out love on her patients, showing them kindness and care lavishly. Not only would she administer the medical skills of her trade, but she took time to listen to them, to sympathize with their unique situations. She truly rejoiced with them when they recovered, and wept bitterly when they did not. It was emotionally taxing, but that's just what she needed. Through her own emotional deprivation she had learned the value of love and the joy of sharing it, even with strangers.

The members of the Macedonian churches, congregations established by the Apostle Paul, had known great financial poverty. Yet, when the relatively wealthy congregation in Jerusalem began to suffer great need following a succession of famines hitting the Holy Land, they committed themselves to contributing in a profound way to the great collection organized by Paul for the Jerusalem church. As Theodora had learned through emotional poverty the joy of loving, through the Macedonians' financial deprivation they had learned the joy, not of receiving, but of giving.

This is a great truth which continues to mystify many in our world: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). In that passage from Acts 20, Paul is quoting Jesus, who certainly knew a thing or two about giving. As Paul says in our text: "Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

In following Christ's example, the Macedonians were so dedicated to the cause of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem that they became an inspiration to other congregations, moving them to increase their efforts in this great charitable cause. Paul writes to the Corinthians about them, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, 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." Paul hoped that the joy of giving would overtake the Corinthian congregation as it had for the Macedonians. He says, "See that you excel in this act of grace also."

It's interesting that Paul calls giving an act of grace, for the word "grace" in Greek (χάρις), can also mean "gift." So, in a sense, the act of giving is itself a gift so that in the exchange of giving and receiving a gift is given in both directions.

When a mother breastfeeds her baby there is, of course, the natural flow of nutrients from mother to child. But did you know that there is also a backflow of nutrients from baby to mother? Studies are showing that certain hormones, such as Prolactin and Oxytocin,



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provide emotional benefits to the mother. But more than that, there are a number of other health benefits that occur. Oxytocin, for instance, helps the uterus recover after childbirth. Studies show that women who have breastfed experience reduced rates of breast and ovarian cancer later in life. Some studies have found that breastfeeding may reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and cardiovascular disease, including high blood pressure and high cholesterol. So breastfeeding provides benefits in both directions.

In a similar way, giving provides benefits in both directions; both the giver and the receiver are blessed in the transaction. Gifts received by those in need cause a great sense of joy and relief, but the giver also receives an inexplicable feeling of joy, happiness, and even excitement. Charitable organizations often speak of the joy of generosity. Few activities in life can match the exhilaration that comes from giving.

Jesus gave in a way unparalleled in human history. He gave His very life, enduring the most excruciating combination of pain and humiliation. What did we get out of that? Forgiveness of sins, salvation, and everlasting life. What did He get out of it? Perhaps we get a hint in Hebrews 12, verse 2: “Jesus . . . for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” It was joy, beloved! For the *joy* set before Him He endured the cross! Giving us forgiveness, life, and salvation brought Him joy! And it continues to bring Him joy every time a baby is baptized and a new soul is added to the kingdom through faith in Him.

Now, you’ll hear people say that God will repay you for your faithfulness in giving. And, yes, I’ve experienced that. They’ll quote Jesus saying, “Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” (Luke 6:38) and that’s certainly true. But God repays in His own way and in His own time. The promise is true, of course, but the fulfillment may take a while. The joy, however, is immediate.

Like Theodora, there have been those who were romantically deprived in life yet found great joy in loving the poor and needy. And like the Macedonians, many have found that their joy in giving was immediate, infectious, and inspirational. The generosity of the Macedonians inspired the Corinthian Christians, a congregation so focused on their own internal squabbles that they could hardly get anything right, and directed their attention outwardly to the degree that Paul later boasted about *them* to the Macedonians.

God grant you the joy of giving, beloved, that you may excel in this act of grace also to the great joy of many, including yourself. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen