

# The Overflowing Life – Part 1

## Experiencing God's Grace

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

January 22, 2006

Dave Tolcyn, President of World Vision Canada, tells the following story:

*During the conflict in Kosovo, I met a 10-year old boy named Liridan who had fled with his parents from the conflict ... While boarding a farm wagon in his local village to escape the invading soldiers, he was struck on the arm with a rifle butt. His arm was shattered and over the course of a harrowing three-day journey, Liridan lost consciousness ... Now Liridan and his family were crowded together in a broken-down gymnasium with scores of refugee families. There was little privacy, a shortage of water and putrid, overcrowded latrines ... (As my interview with Liridan) came to a conclusion, I noticed a small package of tinfoil in his good hand. Earlier a church group had distributed small packages for the children – most of whom owned nothing now except the clothes on their backs. With a child's spontaneity this traumatized boy opened his hand, peeled back the foil, broke a section of chocolate into two, and offered one to me. Liridan's gesture took me completely by surprise ... I felt so small before this selfless act of generosity. (**The Power of Generosity**, pages 4-5).*

True generosity always strikes us that way: it's surprising, overflowing, excessive, and incredibly joyful. Over the next five weeks in a sermon series entitled "The Overflowing Life: Experiencing the Power of Generosity," we'll explore what it means to live in an "overflow mode." In verse 2 of this passage the Apostle Paul referred to a group of Christians who were living in overflow mode: "their overflowing joy ... welled up in rich generosity." Generosity is always about the overflow of our lives. My brothers and sisters, this is an image of normal Christian spirituality. The grace and fullness of God pours into our hearts and we receive God's blessings. But we don't just take it in (or "get fed"); we start to overflow with God's blessings. God's life pours out of us. I want us to discover how to be so touched by God's generosity that it literally overflows and pours out of us. How do we live a generous life? How do we experience the overflowing life?

Our Scripture reading contains a story of surprising, overflowing generosity even in hard times. This story focuses on the generosity of our financial giving, but as we work through this passage I want us to see that generosity is much bigger than that. It's a lifestyle that affects everything we do. Generosity is the overflow of our lives in worship and gratitude to God; it's the overflow of our service to the body of Christ; it's the overflow of our hospitality to others; it's the overflow of our lives in reaching out to those who don't know Christ.

Read verses 1-4. When Paul wrote this letter there were a group of Christians who lived in Jerusalem who were hit by a famine. Imagine an ancient Katrina-like situation: people were poor, hungry and jobless. When Paul heard about the famine he immediately took action, reaching across cultural and ethnic boundaries by asking the Gentile churches to

help out. For Paul it was a wonderful way to show the Gospel of Jesus in action on two fronts: (1) by helping the needy; and (2) by showing the oneness of the body of Christ across ethnic, racial and cultural lines – which was an important theme of the Gospel (see Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:15). So wherever he traveled, Paul told the Gentile churches about the need to help their brothers and sister in Jerusalem.

He told the church in Corinth and they helped - well, sort of. In many ways, this church was blessed with money, education, sophistication, influence, power and spiritual resources. They were a vibrant church, filled with knowledgeable spiritual leaders and rich gifts of the Holy Spirit. That's why in verse 8 Paul would say that they excelled in everything – “in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness...”

Unfortunately, in spite of their resources and opportunities, their lives didn't overflow for God. A few chapters earlier (2 Corinthians 6:12b) Paul told them, “You are restrained in your affections.” In other words, even though God has poured out blessings on you, for some reason, you live like cup with a tight lid on it. So rather than let your life overflow, you hoard, you hold back, you contain it. Again, this is much bigger than just our financial giving; generosity is a certain lifestyle that flows from a transformed heart.

In contrast, in verse 1 Paul tells a different story about a different set of churches. Read verse 1. The Macedonian churches were also started by Paul (you can read about those stories in the New Testament Books of Philippians and Thessalonians). In contrast to the church in Corinth, these churches overflowed with generosity. But here's the surprising thing: these small, young churches were poor and persecuted. Read verse 2. We know from biblical records that they were persecuted (see 1 Thessalonians 1:6b-7 and Philippians 1:29-30). We also know from historical records that the long Roman occupation ruined the economy in Macedonia by taking control of the two greatest sources of income: the gold and silver mines and the timber industry. In addition, the Romans fought several wars on Macedonian soil, ruining the land. Like everyone else in Macedonia, the Christians were in a hard place. It's easy to look generous when life is easy and you're feeling rich, successful and powerful; but these churches acted generous when life was hard. And they didn't just give moderately: they gave over the top. Notice verse 3. Their lives overflowed. Did you notice the contrasts in verse 2: a “very severe trial” contrasted with “overflowing joy;” and “extreme poverty” contrasted with “rich generosity?” Normally those things don't go together.

Now here's another surprising facet of their generosity: no one pressured or even asked them to be generous. They just did it. Read verse 3c-5a. True generosity, a truly overflowing life, is always like that: you can't force it. I or the church leadership or an organization can try to pressure you and control you and manipulate you into generosity – and they might even succeed – but your heart wouldn't truly become a generous heart. The Gospel – the good news about Jesus – does not work that way. That's why Paul would say later in verse 8 as he addressed the Christians in Corinth, “I am not commanding you.” And then he would even give the earthy, realistic message of verse 13. In terms of our situation, Paul might say, “Look, I don't want you to give away so much that you can't pay your bills, you can't feed your kids and you have to wrack up credit card debts.”

But still, the level of overflowing generosity in the Macedonian churches is simply astounding. It overflows even in hard places: a severe trial somehow producing overflowing joy; extreme poverty somehow producing rich generosity. How did this happen? We hear a big clue in verse 1. Read verse 1. The key to their generosity is found in one word that appears ten times in this passage – the Greek word *charis* or grace. This is a story about grace – God’s grace flowing in and God’s grace overflowing out. The only true motive for giving, for living generously, for overflowing with joy in hard places, for worshipping – or for doing anything connected to the Christian life – is found right here: it must be motivated by and a response to God’s grace. Giving – like everything else in the Christian life – and I mean everything, is a joyful, happy, overflowing privilege of responding to God’s grace. It’s never sheer duty; it always leads to delight.

Of course the churches in Macedonia weren’t the ultimate picture of grace: Paul gives us the ultimate picture of grace-in-action in verse 9. Read verse 9. This is the most concise, most power-packed summary of the Gospel in the entire New Testament. In 32 words this verse describes and presents a picture of the most generous giver with the most generous heart in the universe – God. God’s heart is so big with generosity that it will take you a lifetime and beyond to comprehend God’s generous heart. Let’s explore this verse one line at a time:

*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ...* Paul assumes something about God’s love and grace: you can know it because it’s observable. You see, for a Christian, God’s love is always specific, concrete, and grounded in history. It isn’t just a myth or a good story or a warm feeling; it’s always rooted in what God has done in space and time, in real history in the lives of real people. Specifically, it’s rooted and grounded in the life, and death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s why the New Testament always makes this astounding claim: Look, we’re not just making this up. We’re not just telling you nice, religious tales. We saw him. We touched him. We watched him die. We saw him after the resurrection. We ate fish and bread with Jesus. They especially looked to the cross, the place and time when Jesus died for the sins of the world, and then they said, “Do you see? For God grace and love aren’t just warm, gooey feelings. They are grounded in history. God’s words of ‘I love you’ are written in blood on the cross. It doesn’t get clearer than that.”

If you try to prove God’s love and grace from any other foundation, it’s always ambiguous; it’s never clear. For instance, if I say, “Look at the beauty of nature. Sunsets, orchids, dolphins, geese, butterflies, birch trees – don’t they all prove the generous love of God for us?” Yes, they do, but all of creation, including us, is bent and twisted. Nature doesn’t give us a clear picture of God’s generous heart. This was a major stumbling block for Charles Darwin (who, by the way, was probably never a *bona fide* atheist). But as Darwin observed the ambiguity of nature, the beauty of nature and the viciousness of nature, he couldn’t find God’s generous heart. Why would a good and generous God, asked Darwin, design the Ichneumonidae (a wasp) for the express purpose of feeding within the living body of a caterpillar? And why would a good and generous

God allow nature to take his ten year old daughter Annie? It didn't make sense. Nature is fallen, bent and twisted. So is the church. Some people look to the Christian community for a picture of God's generous heart. I know a PhD. student who is perpetually disappointed with the church and with small groups. He keeps saying, "I don't know if I can believe in Christ because Christians can be so dull and inconsistent and hurtful." Yes, and they can be brilliant and faithful and loving. Christian community, like every human community and institution, is ambiguous. Yes, you will find glimpses and hints of God's generous heart in Christian community and in creation. But more than anything, a follower of Christ continually says, "But this is ultimately how I know that God is for me, that God's heart is good and kind and overflowing with generosity for me: I keep coming back to the cross. I keep coming back to the Lord's Supper where I remember that he paid the price for our sins. That proves that God loves me, that God is for me."

... *that though he was rich* ...this points to what is called the pre-existence of Jesus, which means that he was alive way before he was born. As a matter of fact, he existed forever. And in his pre-existence existence Jesus was loaded with wealth. He was rich in glory. He was rich in relationships because God is a Trinity of love and relationship. God is a community of love, a dance of sacrificial family and friendship. Jesus was rich...

... *yet for your sake he became poor* ... Did you catch the contrast? Americans love the rag-to-riches story; this is a riches-to-rags story. How do we picture the infinite descent of Jesus from his glorious wealth into his poverty? I love the true story of a man known as Damien the leper. His birth name was Joseph De Veuster, a Belgian farm boy who studied for the ministry and then moved to the Hawaiian Islands to serve at a large, successful church. At the same time Hawaii was experiencing an outbreak of leprosy and the government started to quarantine the lepers on the island of Molokai. "Molokai became an island of sorrow in the wild beauty of the Hawaiian chain." Between 1866-1873 nearly 1,000 lepers arrived at Molokai, permanently cut off from family and friends, desperately poor, preparing to die from the leprosy that was eating their flesh. In 1873, at his own request, Damien moved to Molokai to pastor the lepers. His first house was the shade of a pandanus tree; his dining room table was a large rock. His supervisors told him to never touch a leper – which he gladly obeyed: the mangled faces and disfigured limbs repulsed him, not to mention the putrid smell of rotting flesh. But soon Damien started touching and hugging them, always addressing them as "me fellow lepers." Over the next eleven years Damien taught the lepers to farm, build houses, play instruments and even form a worship band. The lepers actually began to live a fulfilled and happy life. Then in December of 1884, while soaking his feet in hot water, Damien noticed that he couldn't feel the water. After eleven years Damien had become a leper. Although he was rich, yet for their sakes he became poor.

Of course the story of Jesus is infinitely more remarkable. But notice why he did this: *for your sake*. Can you believe that? I have a hard time believing that's in the Bible. For your sake. Have you ever had someone give you a gift that you didn't expect or deserve – maybe a cup of coffee, or a diamond ring or a surprise party? And, utterly surprised

“You shouldn’t have done this.” Did it make you arrogant? No. Did it make you want to make much of yourself? No. It probably made you deeply humble; it flooded you with grace and love. It overwhelmed you with God’s presence and goodness and generosity. That’s what happens every time we come to the Lord’s Table: we hear the words, “His body was broken for you.” What’s the hardest part to accept? For you. For me? You have to be kidding! You don’t know me! You don’t know my cold heart. You don’t know my family. You don’t know my marriage. You don’t know my addictions. You don’t know my depression or anger or lust. You don’t know my doubt and darkness. And God says, “Look, I know it all; I know stuff about you that you don’t even know. But although Christ was rich for your sake he became poor. Take and eat: this if for you.”

*... so that you through his poverty might become rich.* Sometimes Christians, particularly pastors like me, present the Gospel with a serious distortion. Sometimes we talk so much about sin and brokenness and spiritual poverty – and believe me, we should – that we never tell the rest of the story: in Christ God has made you rich. You may not be rich with stocks and bonds and investments, but ultimately, those aren’t real riches anyway. Those are shallow, cheap riches. You’ve been made rich with real wealth, eternal wealth, riches that can’t ever be taken away from you. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the New Testament declares, “who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:3). On other words, got Jesus (as the ad campaigns used to say)? Well, then you got riches – as a matter of fact, you have all the spiritual riches that God has to offer. (See Ephesians 2:6 as a specific example).

We started with the need to live a generous life. According to Gospel-centered Christian spirituality, joy is found in living an overflowing life. So do you want to leave a legacy? Do you want to make a difference? Do you want to pour out blessings wherever you go? It all starts with God, the most generous giver with the most overflowing grace-filled heart in the universe. But does God really have a generous heart? Can you trust this God? Can you respond to this God not just with duty but with joy and delight, pouring out your love in one joyful act of worship and love and awe? Yes, but it begins and continues into eternity with the Gospel:

*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.*