



# Cooperative Program Bible Study Series

## *Cooperating to Set an Example – Biblical Background –*

### 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-12

***But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving. 2 Corinthians 8:7 NIV***

#### **Introduction**

When you think of a model church, what comes to your mind? *A thriving youth or children's program? A biblical preacher? Traditional and/or contemporary music? A certain number of baptisms per year?* For some, these are the measure of a church's success. And to be sure, they are important concerns. What probably did not immediately pop into your head is a church's budget or the percentage of church members who give their tithes and offerings. A church's success in large part depends upon the money it receives and what it does with that money to extend the work of God's kingdom. As Christians, we are privileged to have a part in the larger context of what God is about in the world. That is why as Southern Baptists we support what is known as the Cooperative Program.

#### **A Brief History of the Cooperative Program**

The work of God's kingdom extends beyond the contributions (money or otherwise) of any one person. And yet, the remarkable truth is that every person's contribution is significant and makes a difference for the whole. It is somewhat like a puzzle. Each person has a piece that helps to complete the overall picture, giving it depth and perspective. As individuals are faithful in giving, the picture becomes a bit more complete.

Southern Baptists, since our beginning in 1845, have always affirmed and supported the Great

Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). The cause of missions has been the heartbeat of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). In light of this, the Cooperative Program (CP) was born. The CP is a unified giving plan, adopted in 1925, which "stretches" one's money to support a variety of Southern Baptist entities that help to strengthen missions and ministries throughout one's state and around the world. Most everyone looks for ways to make a dollar go further, be it food at the grocery store to investments for retirement. People want to feel that they are getting a bargain or good return for their money. In a manner of speaking, the CP is a bargain because of its wide-reaching, united effort to support numerous ministry and mission causes. The local Southern Baptist church is the support base. In adopting its annual budget, your church votes to give a certain percentage to the CP. Messengers sent from your local church and other churches to the SBC each June vote to determine how much of the CP monies are retained for state ministries and how much goes on to the SBC for national/international ministries. Southern Baptists' six theological seminaries, the North American Mission Board, and the International Mission Board are among the entities receiving CP funds. Without CP monies, these and other SBC entities would not have the support base needed to carry on the work they do, and, thus, God's work would be hindered. When CP funds are down, things like the missionary effort and theological education are affected. Your giving indeed makes a difference!

## A Scriptural Charge for Giving

Money is never an easy topic to address in church life. It is a sensitive subject for many people. With this in mind, perhaps a few things should be noted up front:

- No one is forced to give. God wants you to give willingly. “Instruct them . . . to be generous and willing to share” (1 Tim. 6:18, HCSB).
- *There is no “set amount” that a person is obligated to give.* God does not expect, nor does He require for that matter, anyone to give beyond what he or she is able. “*For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have.*” (2 Cor. 8:12, NASV).
- Attitude matters. God delights in the one who gives in a joyful manner. “*God loves the person who gives cheerfully.*” (2 Cor. 9:7, NLT).

As Christians, we need to support God’s work monetarily. Paul knew that any church would never be all it could be if its members did not give. That is why he gave some advice and instructions about giving. The scriptural focus of today’s lesson highlights God’s grace and the wonderful example of the Macedonian churches (probably those of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea). Paul encourages the Corinthian Christians to follow through with their promise on giving. From the passage the following points may be considered.

### 1. The Macedonian churches generously gave themselves and their money to the Lord and others. (2 Corinthians 8:1-5)

Paul’s reference to the Macedonian churches was a time when both he and they experienced difficulties (note 2 Cor. 7:5 and 8:2). Both were fully aware of hardships which, depending upon their responses to them, could have hindered or even dismissed their ministry efforts. In other words, these could have been used as excuses. Yet, even though the Macedonian Christians were extremely poor, they were rich when it came to their giving because they were generous. It would seem that if anyone had a legitimate excuse for not giving, it would be the Macedonians Christians. After all, they needed everything they had to overcome their deep poverty—did they not? But they gave anyway,

doing so with joy. In spite of the difficulties the Macedonians faced, ironically it was *out of their afflictions* that they gave. They willingly chose to give, even though their circumstances were less than the ideal. And Paul commends them for this, because it gave evidence of their Christian character and the work of God’s grace in their lives.

Do you ever find yourself offering excuses for not giving money to the church or the CP? To be sure, life sometimes brings us difficult circumstances, financial and otherwise—things which could give us reason for excuses not to give. The Macedonian Christians “gave themselves first to the Lord”. (2 Corinthians 8:5). This is the underlying principle for all Christian giving.

### 2. Paul also expected the Corinthian Christians to excel in giving. (2 Corinthians 8:6-7)

Selfless generosity was not something to be practiced only by the Macedonian Christians; it is a quality that every Christian should build into his/her life. God had gifted the Corinthian Christians in many ways—in faith, speech, knowledge, diligence, and love. Now Paul wanted them to bring their character and Christian commitment to a higher level by excelling “*also in this grace*” (2 Corinthians 8:7). The Corinthians had earlier made a promise to help the Jerusalem Christians, but were lax in fulfilling that promise. Now they had opportunity, with Paul’s encouragement, to make that promise good. Giving resources of money, time, and effort to help other Christians is an act of “grace,” as it reflects the gracious act of giving that Jesus Himself performed on our behalf.

### 3. Jesus set the ultimate example in giving to help others. (2 Corinthians 8:8-9)

Neither the Macedonians, the Corinthians, nor Missouri Baptists could ever out give God as He gave Himself in Jesus Christ. Paul reminds his readers: “*You know the grace—that is, the gracious act—“of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Corinthians 8:9). Though He owns all the wealth of the universe, yet “*for your sakes He became poor.*” Jesus chose to be born to a family so poverty stricken that they had to give birds—not sheep—as sin offerings (see Luke 2:24; Lev. 12:8). And He did this “*so that by His poverty you might become rich.*”

What is a clear conscience and entrance into heaven worth to you? The price is one that none

of us can afford, not even the richest person on earth. But Jesus gives these priceless gifts to anyone who accepts Him as Savior. Jesus' supreme act of generosity on our behalf should inspire all of us to give what we can to help other Christians.

#### **4. Compassionate thoughts should be backed up by generous giving. (2 Corinthians 8:10-12)**

The Christians in Corinth knew they should be givers. They had been moved by the plight of the Christians in Jerusalem. More than "a year ago" (2 Corinthians 8:10) they had agreed to send money to the persecuted Christians there. But in the busyness of life, their sincere intentions had remained just that—mere intentions. These intentions had never been translated into generous acts of giving. Now was the time, however, to transform their compassionate thoughts into faithful deeds. And Paul encourages them to do so "according to . . . [their] means" (2 Corinthians 8:11). God would be pleased with their giving according to what they had, not according to what they did not have. What mattered here was not the amount, but the intent of the heart.

Perhaps God has placed upon your heart the desire to help struggling young seminary students or missionaries who have given up the pleasures and comforts of life in America to share Jesus with others around the world. When you give, your compassion is turned into an act of generosity. Giving through the Cooperative Program helps touch the lives of others and will enrich your own life in the process.