

SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | **PARTICIPATION** | POWER | PACE-SETTING | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

SANETTA PONTON

Participation

#2. Are we finding ways to engage life together through denominational, conference, and local events, service, and fellowship?

2 Corinthians 8:1-15, NIV

THE COLLECTION FOR THE LORD'S PEOPLE

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 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.

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 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.

And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. For if the willingness is there, the gift is

acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."

No one wants to be a stagnant Christian. Well, let me not make assumptions—I *hope* no one wants to be a stagnant Christian! I hope and pray that each day we desire to grow in the love and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I hope, as Paul prays in Ephesians, that God will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that we would live lives worthy of the gospel and that grace would abound in our lives. For this time that we share together, even virtually, I want us to consider God's invitation for us to grow, to not be stagnant. And particularly to grow in grace.

We use the word *grace* often in church world, don't we? We seem to know it when we see it or feel it, but it can be difficult to define. You can Google it or open up your favorite Bible dictionary and see what everyone from Matthew Henry to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Howard Thurman has to say about grace. For me, the gift of grace shows up in my life as strength for the journey, in my transformed heart, in tender rebuke, or in God's unmerited favor in my life, and especially in the person and work of Jesus Christ. How would you define God's grace in your life? As amazing as God's grace is, it's even more amazing that he invites us to grow in it. Would you join me in exploring how God might want us to grow in grace in a way we may not have considered before?

In our text, Paul and Timothy are writing to the church in Corinth and other churches throughout Achaia, asking them to support the Jerusalem churches. Apparently a collection had been started the previous year by the Corinthian church, under the direction of Titus, but had either slowed down or was completely halted. Paul is sending Titus back to help the Corinthian church



complete their obligation to help support the Jerusalem church—what Paul calls an “act of grace.” He says, he’s not writing to command them. Rather, he is testing the sincerity of their love. He is inviting the Corinthian church to participate in the grace of giving on behalf of Christians in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church is in need, but we don’t know why. Maybe it’s because of famine or perhaps persecution. Either way, the Jerusalem church, which was once self-sufficient, now finds itself in financial need. And the need is great. Paul is soliciting money from among the Christian churches to support the Jerusalem churches. It’s an important request, not just because the Jerusalem church is in need, but also because Paul is reaching out beyond the Jewish Christian community to the Gentile Christians as well.

Many of our churches may understand what it feels like to be a church in need. Covid hit so many of us hard and, while we may have been fine before, we may be struggling now. Maybe it wasn’t Covid at all. Maybe giving is down, or maybe your membership is aging or moving away. You may be the church now in need.

In many ways we face the same obstacles as the first century church. Gentile churches were being asked to participate in the life of Jewish churches. There had been longstanding tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Perhaps Paul sees the Jerusalem church’s need as an opportunity to bridge that gap. The irony is that it is the Jewish church in Jerusalem in need, and the Gentiles, the seeming outsiders, are the ones in a financial position to help. Paul sees this challenge as an opportunity to grow in grace.

What opportunities is God presenting to us, the Evangelical Covenant Church, to grow in grace, particularly through our commitment to multiethnic ministry? What is God’s invitation to us as a church family as we seek to bridge the gaps between our white churches and our ethnic churches? Could it be that tragedies like the Covid-19 pandemic or the murders by law enforcement of unarmed Black men and women or the rise of anti-Asian hate and violence present fresh opportunities for us to participate in life together? I believe God is inviting us to grow in grace, and it’s available to us right now.

Normally, this text is preached about stewardship, and indeed it is about giving. I will not deny or overlook that. However, our focus today is not so much on

monetary giving as it is on the grace that abounds from God that encourages us to give. And by giving I don’t just mean money. Let me be clear, as a member of the pastoral team at Metro Community Church, I understand the importance of money for the fulfillment of God’s mission to the church. But also, as the pastor of justice, advocacy, and compassion, I want to invite you to think beyond money to the ways you can give of yourselves in the lives of one another and even other churches. Let us consider the ways God graces us to give of our time and our physical beings to the building up of his kingdom.

As Paul points out, when we are lacking in our giving, when we are lacking in our generosity, we are actually lacking in a specific grace. He acknowledges the strength of the Corinthian church, which is pretty amazing because they faced many internal and external challenges. Nevertheless, he says in verse 7 that they excel in faith, speech, knowledge, complete earnestness, and the love they have kindled in them. Yet, he says, they have not yet excelled in the grace of giving. They need to grow in grace, specifically in the grace of giving.

The lack of growth is pretty obvious to Paul. There is a problem, the Corinthians are aware of it, but they do not want to step up to help. The Jerusalem church is in crisis. Even worse for Paul, the Corinthians had committed to help and have now neglected their commitment. Paul is very concerned, not so much about the money but about the condition of their hearts, the absence of the grace of generosity. He is concerned about how easy it is for them to distance themselves from their brothers and sisters. It troubles him that they can so easily disengage from parts of the body of Christ, even in times of crisis.

Isn’t this the case for many of us as well? It’s easy to remain self-centered. It’s our natural tendency. We are so inwardly focused that we can often fail to see others in need. Even at the church level, we can remain in our silos. We hear the needs of others and maybe because we don’t know them, or they are different from us, or miles or language separate us, and we turn our heads and ignore it or disengage. But Christ is calling us to more. What do we do when Christ is calling us not to ignore, not to disengage, not to hoard or hold back but to give? How do we grow in the grace of giving? How is giving even a grace?

First, giving is a sign of God’s grace. Giving is a sign of God’s grace at work in us. Paul invites the Corinthian



church to participate in giving to the Jerusalem church because he knows that it will symbolize God's grace at work in the life of the church. Paul begins the chapter by stating in verses 1-4, "And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people."

Paul uses the Macedonian church as an example of God's grace at work in the life of the church. They underwent severe trial. Nevertheless, they possessed an overwhelming joy despite their extreme poverty. It seems antithetical that they would have joy despite the trials they were enduring, but that is the grace that God places upon their lives. Despite their difficulties, they disciplined themselves not to turn inward. Their concern for others was proof of their love and their spiritual maturity.

The result was the grace of generosity bestowed upon them. They gave beyond their ability, so much so that it surprised Paul. But even more than that, they begged for the privilege of serving others. They begged to participate (to share) in coming alongside another church. They actually begged for the grace of serving others. The word we have translated as "privilege" is actually *charis* in Greek, which means grace. They considered it a grace received from God to have the privilege to help others. The Macedonian churches understood that it was because of grace that they could give and it was a demonstration of God's grace in their lives for them to give.

Do you consider it God's grace when you have the opportunity to help someone? When was the last time you begged God for the opportunity, the grace, to share with others? Consider the missed grace moments when we refuse to come alongside God in his work. How many grace moments have we missed?

Like many churches, our church set up a food pantry during Covid. In the beginning we didn't know what we could do, but we knew we needed to do something to help our struggling community. This was the first time we had ever done anything like this. In the beginning, we thought we would give out groceries for a week or two to families at a local elementary school and within our church. As the pandemic continued, within weeks our

numbers swelled from around 30 families to 80 to over 150.

We were not the least bit prepared. We had no idea how to run a food pantry. But we were committed to serving. We were committed to the grace of giving. It was stressful—long days coordinating with so many people and finding food wherever we could. And yet, it was a blessing to know that God could use us to serve his people.

Each week, we saw God's grace abound in our lives as volunteers, in the lives of our neighbors we served, and in the church more broadly. We were able to partner with the Covenant and received a grant to help fund our program. We received smaller grants from local organizations, and we partnered with every agency we could. We shared resources, space, and best practices with other churches. And God met us each week with his grace. Food came from nowhere, it seemed. People we had never met before heard of us and donated crates of food—fresh bread, produce, canned goods. One week we ran out of beans and who should contact us, but a grocery store owner who had 20 boxes of packaged dried beans!

And not just with food, but God showed up in other ways as well. No volunteer became ill. We have developed strong relationships with the Latinx community we struggled to connect with. And we have received God's abundant blessings in our lives. You haven't lived until you've had a woman pray for you in her native tongue, bestowing God's blessings upon you. God invites us to receive his gift of grace when we open our hearts to give.

The Macedonian churches knew this. But it doesn't seem like it came naturally to them any more than it is natural for many of us. Verse 5 tells us, first, they gave themselves over to God and then they gave to others in obedience to God. They yielded themselves wholly and completely to God. Their generosity was the outgrowth of their surrender and submission to God. The true foundation of all Christian giving is giving oneself first to the Lord. Generosity stems from devotion to God and God working in us—dealing with our selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-preservation. God gave them the grace to give because of their willingness to yield and be obedient to him. When we are spontaneously generous toward others, we demonstrate God's grace at work in us.



Should the Corinthians begin to give again, their participation would reveal that God's grace was at work within them just as much as it is within the Macedonian churches. Where is the evidence of God's grace at work in us? Our giving is a sign of God's grace at work in our lives.

Not only is giving a sign of God's grace in our lives, but **second, giving declares an understanding of God's grace.** Giving declares that we understand the gift of God's grace in our lives. Verse 9 reads, "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." When we give to others, we demonstrate that we know the extent to which God gave to us. Jesus gave it all for us. He became poor so that we could become rich. Jesus emptied himself of the riches of his glory as God to become human. Philippians 2 reminds us, "He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (v. 7). He emptied himself so that through his incarnation (his becoming human) and his atoning death (taking on and dying for our sins) that we might not only become righteous but inherit the kingdom. Jesus is the ultimate example of self-giving. There is no greater demonstration of love. Greater love hath no one that this: to lay down one's life for a friend. And no greater demonstration of grace. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

If you understand the cost and the extent of God's grace, what Christ went through on our behalf—the suffering he endured, the shame he endured, the pain he endured—delivered to us by grace and grace alone. If you understand, and I mean really appreciate, what Christ has done and is doing for you, how could you not extend grace to others? How could you not give of yourselves on behalf of others? The greatest incentive is not shame or even hearing how other churches do things; the greatest incentive is dwelling on the goodness of God in your own life. That's where the willingness is born. We operate out of the grace we have already been given.

Growing up, we used to sing a song that says, "If the Lord never does anything else for me, he's already done enough." What mattered for the Macedonian churches and for us is the grace we have already been shown through Jesus Christ. God has already given us

everything when he gave us Christ. When we have been beneficiaries of such undeserved grace, how can we shut our hearts, or any part of ourselves, to our brothers and sisters? When we study the cross and consider the lavish gift of grace and love poured out upon us in blood, and the depth of Jesus's sacrifice on our behalf, the only response is to be liberal and to lavish in grace and love and giving toward others. When we give from our hearts, without compulsion, it is because we know what has been given to us in Christ.

And the aim is not to be Christ, the aim is to live lives of grace out of the grace bestowed upon us because of Christ. And yes, that giving may be financial, but when we consider the life of Jesus, let us remember that Jesus's was an embodied giving. His giving, the demonstration of his grace, was incarnational. That means that we need to live incarnationally too. We have to show up for our brothers and sisters. We have to be present. We have to participate. We need to give of our physical beings and of our hearts by listening, by journeying through life together, by entering into one another's history and present. When we give of ourselves for our brothers and sisters, as Christ did for us, it declares we understand God's grace toward us.

Finally, giving is a conduit of God's grace. We become conduits of God's grace when we give. In verses 13-15, Paul explains, "Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: 'The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little.'"

How we use our time, talents, and resources preaches a sermon to others. Our generosity, whether in time or money, is about engaging with God in love for the world. God invites us to be conduits of his grace to the world. He invites us to participate in his work in the world. Giving allows grace to live in community. Here, Paul is calling the Corinthian churches to participate and come alongside their sister church in Jerusalem and support them. He is calling the Corinthians to the grace found in ministry.

In verse 4, Paul says that the Macedonian churches begged for the privilege, the grace, of sharing in this service to God's people. The word translated as "service"



in the NIV is *diakonia*, the same word translated in other places as “ministry.” The Macedonian churches begged for the opportunity to participate in ministry. They saw giving, especially to one of their sister churches, as ministry. Giving in this sense is an act of solidarity. We recognize that those in need are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and we gladly and eagerly beg for the opportunity to participate in helping them overcome their need. We cherish the opportunity to work alongside them. This is how community is built. And we do so, knowing that one day it might be us who are in need. Now, our plenty supplies, next time it’s theirs for us. It’s a community built on sharing and equality. The Jerusalem project offers the Corinthians the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves, with impact far beyond their immediate community. It allows them to be conduits of grace for the building up of communities of equity.

One of the benefits of being a part of a national denomination is the gift of connection. Through our national office and local conferences, we have the opportunity to serve alongside our sister churches in ministry. Are we taking advantage of those opportunities to participate and engage in life with our brothers and sisters? Metro has been blessed by partnering with and participating in ministry opportunities with other churches within our conference. Each year, New York Covenant Church, who is about 30–45 minutes away from us, hosts the Covenant Justice Coalition Conference. And each year, Metro gladly shows up as volunteers and participants. It’s in these conferences that our faith is deepened, particularly in the area of justice. But we also grow in fellowship and encouragement with one another. Covenanters from all over the East Coast come—from Boston and New Hampshire all the way down to Virginia. As we wrestle with biblical texts and seek to make sense of the world around us, our eyes and our hearts are opened as we listen to and learn from one another. Each year, the Holy Spirit meets us. We gain insight and new ways to engage societal problems. God’s grace abounds over lunches, chats at the coffee station, and roundtable conversations. What insight can urban churches bring to suburban issues of gentrification? How might the Holy Spirit speak through rural churches about urban housing conditions? Unless we come together, we’ll never know. God’s invitation awaits us to grow in grace.

As I record this message, I do so in the wake of the 1900% rise in anti-Asian hate and violence across the country. Elderly Asian men and women—grandmothers and grandfathers—the most revered and honored in Asian culture are being targeted. We just endured the tragic murder of eight people in Atlanta, six of them Asian women. Black men are still being killed at the hands of law enforcement—whether by knees breaking the flow of air or by shooting. How can non-Asian American or non-African American churches be conduits of God’s grace for these hurting communities? Maybe giving of oneself is giving up the comfort of ignoring these issues. Maybe it means giving up one’s pride or the sense of blame to have the difficult conversations. Maybe it means giving up one’s reputation to stand side-by-side in solidarity with hurting communities and declare that the image of God will not be diminished in anyone on your watch. Do you desire to be a conduit of God’s grace?

What does it look like for your church to do what Paul is asking of the Corinthian church? What does it look like for you to grow in the grace of giving, particularly by participating in the life and ministry of sister churches in the Covenant?

God wants us to grow in grace as individuals and as a church body. He invites us to grow in his grace through giving, not just of money but of ourselves. And when we do so, our giving, our participation becomes a sign of God’s grace. It declares our understanding of God’s grace, and we become conduits of God’s grace. But the point is not just that we grow in grace, although that is very important. The more important point is that at the end of the day, God is glorified through the grace of our giving.

Your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. As Paul says later in 2 Corinthians 9:12–13, “This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.”

When we answer God’s call to give—whether monetarily or physically—it overflows in thanksgiving to God. When we come alongside our brothers and sisters and



participate in the life and ministry of our sister churches, thanksgiving results. For the Jerusalem church, they will praise God for having their monetary needs met. For us, we celebrate the obedience, as Paul says, that accompanies our confession of the gospel. Generosity is an expression of the gospel. Participation is an expression of the gospel. We say we believe in multiethnic ministry but when we participate, when we show up, that's the true demonstration and God is glorified. It's not enough that we share the same denominational affiliation. If we are not engaged in life with one another then nothing has changed. If we say multiethnic ministry is important to us, then complete the mission. This is God's invitation for us to grow in grace today.

And God is glorified. Because then we look a little bit more like God's kingdom here on earth. It's a radical proposition but it just might work. First Nations people and white people and Black people and Latinx, regardless of language, socioeconomic status, country of origin, rural or urban, Republican or Democrat—could we actually worship the same God and be in true fellowship with one another? I think I've read that somewhere before: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9, NIV). What a beautiful image. When we give of ourselves particularly to multiethnic ministry, God will grace us with a glimpse of heaven here on earth.

"When we all get to heaven what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus, we'll sing and shout the victory!" What if we could see that now? May it be so.