

**THE
BON AIR
PULPIT**

James D. Pardue, Pastor

October 8, 2000

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Sermon: *The Completion of Grace*

About twenty years after Jesus earthly life was ended, the people in Israel went through a very, very severe economic down turn. Part of that was due to famine, part of it was due to the politics, but the whole country was in utter chaos and turmoil. What was happening is that many of the Christians who were, of course in the minority, were being persecuted and they were really suffering. Paul, who started churches throughout the Mediterranean area, decided what he would do is ask those churches to give money to help their brothers and sisters in Israel. What happened in one area was so remarkable and made such an impression upon him that he used that to write to others and that example has become the example for Christians now for two thousand years. It is found in the book of 2 Corinthians 8, and I want to read it for you. What you will find is this word grace that keeps on appearing. We wanted to talk to you this morning about how this grace can become complete in your life. Let me read. *“Now brothers we want you to know about the grace that God gave to the Macedonian churches. Out of their most severe trial their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up into rich generosity. For I testify that they gave, not only as much as they were able, but even far more than their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege in sharing in this service to others. They did this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will. We urged Titus as he had made the beginning to bring to completion of this act of grace on your part. So just as you excel in everything, in faith, speech, knowledge, and complete earnestness and in your love for us, see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it to the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ as though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through His poverty, you might become rich.”*

When the English preacher John Newton wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” I am sure he could never understand its world wide impact because the hymn has become the best known, and probably one of the best loved hymns in all of the Christian community. I have heard it in all kinds of places, all kinds of settings, sometimes with Christian artists and sometimes in people that I wonder if they even understand what the words mean. I had that happen a few months ago when I was in a situation where all of a sudden I realized the people were getting ready to sing “Amazing Grace” and I wondered if they even understood what the word grace meant. I wanted to ask you, “I wonder if you understand what the word grace means?”

The story is told about the man who wrote it. He was a man who was captain of a cargo ship, his run used to be from England down to Africa. When he left England he had only rum and whisky and he would take it down and use that for money. He would then load his ship up with human cargo, with slaves, and take them back to England and they would be sold all over the world. He lived such a reprobate life that even for awhile he ended up being a slave. Finally someone gave him a New Testament and someone introduced him to Jesus Christ and his life was dramatically changed and he even spent the last part of his life as a minister. One day up in his parsonage that over looked the old English church, he penned the words *“Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound that Saved a Wretch Like Me.”* Newton understood what grace was, my question for you is, “Do you understand?” Grace is something so different and it means that God acts in such a way that when Newton heard it, he said this is amazing. What grace is, is that God acted in a way you don’t think he would. You think that because you do certain things in your life that God is going to bring judgment upon you. Yet the Bible says what He does is offer mercy. You think that God is some how going to bring wrath and what the Bible says is that God turns around and He brings love. All of us who have experienced His grace began to stand in utter humility before Him and in great praise before Him as we come to recognize that He has acted in a way that we could never understand. The Bible says that what God wants to do in all of your lives and in mine, is that He wants to make us people of grace. He

wants us to act in a way that when people look at us they say “they are doing something so different, so out of character, that really we can’t understand what is happening in their lives.”

One of the ways in which that was done, is in the passage I read today. What happened was, here was people in Israel, that were in tremendous difficulty and Paul went to take up an offering. He said these people acted so differently, they acted so out of character, that I can only describe it that this is an act of grace within their life. They began to do things that really are not explainable on a human level. Most of us have a false impression that most people are really very generous. The reality is that we are not.

In the United States, the wealthiest nation in the world, if you put together all the money that people give to churches, all the money that people give to charity, all the money that people give to educational institutions, it comes up to 2% of our incomes. The amazing thing is, that while we are becoming richer and richer, we are giving less and less percentage wise. So that we are actually in America today, giving less money percentage wise than people gave in the depth of depression in the nineteen thirties. Really what we are doing with our money, is we are getting all we can and canning all we get. We are holding on to it and getting more things for ourselves but we are certainly not turning it around using it to help people in need or using it to help people who are less fortunate than we are.

I began to understand this when I was just a very young minister. I was pastor of a church and it was a mission church and we were just building our first building. Many of you are aware that my wife is a physical therapist and when we were first married she worked full time. She came to me and she said you can’t believe what happened today. One of my patients is, and she mentioned his name, and of course I knew who he was because he was one of the best known men in our area. He was the largest real estate broker in our area. In the course of my treatment to him, she asked, “Who are you, what do you do, and what does your husband do. She said, “I told him and it came out that we were building a building and with out any word he said, “I want to have a part in that.” You can imagine a young preacher building his first little church building and one of the richest men in town said he wanted to have a part. I went back and I got to think of all the things we could do. Man I began to build and dream bigger and all sorts of opportunities. He said, “I am going to bring the gift at the next appointment,” and I knew when the appointment was. After the appointment was over, I showed up at the hospital. She said, “Here it is.” Man you talk about sugar plums dancing in your head, I walked out and opened it up. I counted it. It was two dollars and fifty cents. Really what he did, since it was all coins, he probably took the money that was on top of his dresser and put it in.

What so impressed the apostle Paul is that he knew that generosity is not one of our strong suits. What he ran into was a group of people who literally did something so generous and so out of character with people that Paul wrote it in the Bible. We have been reading it for two thousand years. I want to tell you, when grace comes into your life, when you begin to see things in a different way, then there are some things that begin to happen inside of you that will also astound others with your generosity. Let me just point them out to you. The first thing that is going to happen is that when grace comes in, you receive a joy that enables you to do beyond what people think is the ordinary. These people themselves were poor. There are two words in the Bible for poor. Poor, like I grew up which meant that I didn’t have everything that I wanted and poor which means you don’t have anything. The word that is used for these people is that second word. These people were so overwhelmingly poor. You can imagine when you get in a well like that and you look around and somebody comes and says there is somebody over here that has a need, would you give to them. The normal reaction is, “Man I have more needs than I know what to do with. How in the world can I do that?” Paul said what amazed him was that they turned around and they began to say yes, we will do something. He began to ask the question why. He said the reason why was that, listen, they were filled with joy that what God had already done for them.

I want you to listen carefully. If you ever realize that all that you have is gift and if you ever become a great receiver, it is easy to become a great giver. Because you recognize that what you have is all because of God’s grace. You are filled with joy in Him and therefore it is easy for you to take your resources and be able to give. I understood this years ago. One of the men in our church was named Jack. Jack was an up and coming young man. Jack lost his job. At that time in my home state of Louisiana workman’s compensation was thirty-five dollars a week. The next Sunday Jack came to church, I knew that Jack had lost his job and I talked about it. He said, “Oh! things are getting along pretty well. I am on workman’s comp now.” I said, “Yes, thirty-five dollars a week.” He said, “Well, you know one of the

teachers is absent and they asked me to go teach. I wanted you to take my envelope and put it in the offering plate for me.” I don’t have the foggiest notion what people give, that is not my business, that is between you and God. I never know what people give. He gave me his envelope and I got ready to put it in the offering plate. I just happened to look on it. It was three dollars and fifty cents. After the service was over I went to him and I said, “You know Jack, I don’t ever look at people’s envelopes and know what they give. But you gave it to me and I turned it in and I just wanted you to know that meant something to me. I wanted you to know that I understand that you were tithing your workman’s comp of three dollars and fifty cents.” Jack looked at me and this is what he said, “I can’t help but do that. I have been given so much.” Do you understand it wasn’t hard for him to do that. It was easy for him to do that. Why? Because he had a joy. What was his joy? He was a great receiver. He never thought about how much he was giving. He thought about how much God had given to him. In gratitude to God, it was easy to be able to do that for others. Once you understand that what God has done is so amazing, then it is easy to be able to give and recognize how amazing other people would think is amazing to you.

Last summer when Judy and I went over to see our daughter in Mozambique, our daughter asked that we bring glasses for people there who could not see. You had boxes of glasses and we took them. One of my joys was sitting in my daughter’s back yard and having people come by. I was the optometrist and what that means is you put them on, and can you see. No I can’t see. Well, take that one off and put this one on. Can you see? Yes, I can see. There was a man who came by that my daughter told me was a pastor. He said through my daughter’s translation, “I sure hope I can get something I can see because I can’t read my Bible anymore.” We sat there and finally he turned and said “I can see.” He said, “Do you have another pair just like that?” I said, “I don’t know. Put them in.” We went through again. Put them in. Who is that for? He said, “That is my wife.” I said, “She may not be able to see.” “Oh she can see through mine, she can see through them.” I gave him glasses. He got on his bicycle and rode away. The next week, he showed back up on his bicycle and on his handlebars, he had two roosters. Upside down. He got off and he came over to my son-in-law and to me and he said, “I want to give you a gift.” My son-in-law told me he had ridden for five hours on a bicycle, one way. He was going to turn around and ride five hours back. But he wanted to give us the two chickens. I had the opportunity to go see where he lived because we went out to his little church. The only thing he has in this world, were those two chickens. If you had sat down with him, I am your financial advisor. I wouldn’t suggest you give away those two chickens. Do you know what he would have said? I can’t help but give away my two chickens. Why? Because of what has been given to me. Once you are a great receiver, it is easy to become a great giver. How can you not help but? There is a joy inside of you that enables you to be able to do it.

The second thing that you notice that they did was that when grace is in your life, giving becomes a privilege and not an obligation. Listen to what he said. “They wanted the privilege of being able to give.” You see some people think of it only as an obligation, a burden, something they are asking me to do. These people looked upon it as a privilege. Thank God, I am going to be able to give to somebody else. Don’t rob me of this privilege. I want the opportunity to be able to give to my brothers and my sisters in need and once they begin to understand that, my what a difference it made.

The missionary story is in the country of Korea, where Christianity is just growing by leaps and bounds. There was a farmer who was a member of one of the churches in Korea. They had a great need and he made a gift. The missionary was taking a guest by to see the man and thank him for his gift. When he came up, the farmer was there, and he was plowing. But in the place where the ox was, there was his strapping son and he was pulling the plow and his daddy was there doing it. The guest turned and said to the missionary, “My goodness, the man doesn’t have anything.” He said, “Oh yes, they have an ox.” “What did he do with it?” “He gave it to his church.” He said “Oh, I am sorry.” He said “Oh, he isn’t sorry, the only thing he was sorry for was, that he had only one ox to give.”

You see, it wasn’t a burden to him. It was a privilege to him. Once you begin to have grace to work in your life, then all of a sudden things become privileges and not burdens. You see, you can give without loving, but you can not love without giving. Once you begin to have love in your heart then you begin to understand this is a wonderful privilege. I am going to be able to help somebody else.

There is an old Jewish story that I love. The professor was teaching his students. How can you tell the difference when night becomes day? You can tell the difference when night becomes day when you can tell the difference between a sheep and a dog. No. You can tell the difference when night becomes day

when you can tell the fig tree from an olive tree. No. The word of the professor. You can tell when night becomes day when you see a stranger and know that he is your brother. Night never becomes day unless you understand that strangers are your brothers and if you don't see that it makes no difference how bright the light, it is still night. Here were people they would never see. Never see, but who were they? They were my brothers and sisters. I want the privilege of being able to help. They gave more than they thought they could.

The last thing I want to tell you out of this scripture. Grace giving is the kind of giving that grows out of a commitment to God and not to people. He said they made a commitment to God. Let me show you how that works. What you make commitments to is what you find easy to give to. When my wife comes in and she says, "You got a little money, I would like to do this." I find it easy to give to my wife. Now you know why that is true? I made a commitment to her. When my children were small and they would come in and say, "Dad, we need money for school." I found it easy to give to my kids. Why? Because I had made commitments to them. I have other people I have made commitments to, I find it easy to give. When I make a commitment to someone, then I find it easy to be able to share what I have. The greatest commitment that we have all made, is what? Our commitment to God. It is easy for me to give to Him, because I have made a commitment to Him. These people, the Bible says, made a commitment because of what God has done for them.. It is easy for them to be able to give. Once you understand commitment, and once you understand that giving comes out of commitment, then you are able to do it. It is easy to give to people, once you have given your life to God. Once you give your life to Him, then it is easy to give to people. Because you are just an instrument of God to try and meet their needs in their own life.

I love my pastor friend story. A lady who was very needy came to him and out of her commitment to God, made a gift. Like I inadvertently did with my friend Jack, he looked at the gift and said "I have to give that back to you. I can't take that." She said "Young man, I wasn't giving it to you." Do you understand that when you give, it is out of a commitment to Him. It is not to the circumstances. I have understood all of my life, I never give money to the church. I give money to God. I just have to give it at the church. As I give out of my commitment to Him, it is easy for me to be able to give.

I received an invitation to come back to eastern North Carolina a few months ago. I regret to this day I wasn't able to go. Let me tell that story. When I went to eastern North Carolina, a city of about twenty thousand people, I began to realize that a lot of people in the town had made lots of money and a lot of people had nothing. A part of the ministry there was helping people in need. Finally we got all of the ministers together and said we have to work together to do this better. We all thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if we had some place where we could put food, put some used clothes and maybe we could do things. But we said what if we had to go out and buy something, then we wouldn't have money to give anything away. One of the ladies in the committee meeting said I work for Mrs. So and so and everybody knew who Mrs. So and So was. They said she has an empty store building down around the town square. Maybe she would sell it to us cheap. They all took a poll and they said we want you to go ask her. She was a rough, tough, lady. She had made big bucks, but she had made it by being very salty tongued. I had an appointment at three o'clock in the afternoon and I had my whole speech lined up and I was telling her what we were going to do. Right in the middle of it, she turned to me and she said. "I have heard enough, I will give it to you." I said, "What does that mean, I will give it to you." I turned to her and I said, "I don't understand, you will give it to me?" She said, "I have listened to you, you don't listen to me. I told you I will give it to you." I said, "For how much?" She said, "You really don't listen, do you? I told you I would give it to you." She said, "That is enough, good bye." I got up and walked out and all the people were over at the church, praying. I walked in and they said "What did she say?" I said "She said she would give it to us." "What does that mean?" "You don't listen very well, do you? She said she would give it to us" "How much?" "You don't listen very well. I will give it to you."

One of the joys I had was, there on the town square, all of the men from churches came in and remolded that store. I remember them bringing the food in and appliances in. It was just an absolute joy. My invitation was to come back fifteen years later. That has now grown to where they have sold that store, have a much bigger place, a full time director, an endowment fund and giving all kinds of stuff away and helping all kind of folk. In that town, they have built a civic center that seats about twenty-five hundred people. They were having a big banquet and everybody who was anybody was coming just to say what a wonderful addition this was to the congregation.

I want to tell you this story. The first Christmas in the store, people from the community had given all kind of food and clothes. We had many boxes and I was putting stuff in and my good friend Bill was here. Bill, who had made lots of money, was putting canned beans and all kinds of stuff in the box. He turned to me and said, "This is great." A quiver in his voice, said, "You know, we really don't have it right, until we know how to give." Listen to how that scripture ended. *You are great in your faith, you are great in what you do and you are great in how you teach.* I want you to be great in the grace of giving. Once you get that right, the rest of it comes pretty easy. There are people in this room today who are great receivers, God has just poured out His blessing on you. Now it is time for you to make commitments to Him.