

## **“Empowered by God – Responding by Grace”**

### **2 Corinthians 8:1-7**

Paul begins the two chapters of II Corinthians 8 and 9 with the statement that all giving has, as its foundation, the grace of God. Charis, Grace, means God’s goodness, God’s mercies to us. These blessings of God are always freely given to us, never earned by us.

Then in verses 1-5, Paul describes the Macedonian believers in the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea, as a rare breed of Christians. Paul holds them up as an example for every church in every place, especially Divinity as we continue our annual fall stewardship emphasis and make our pledges.

Paul knows that non-Christians had subjected the Macedonian Christians to trial and persecution. Their discipleship had cost them dearly. They were, according to the Greek text, “dirt poor, really destitute”.

But the amazing thing is that in their extreme poverty, they expressed a wealth of liberality in their giving. Because they have suffered persecution for the Gospel, they discovered the deepness of God’s love and power. And, because they have personally experienced God’s love and power through suffering, they are now ready to take concrete action in giving money to support the ministry of his church, his body in the world. They knew they were doing the right thing.

2 Corinthians 8:1-7. . . <sup>1</sup>We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; <sup>2</sup>for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. <sup>3</sup>For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means,

and even beyond their means, <sup>4</sup>begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints — <sup>5</sup>and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, <sup>6</sup>so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. <sup>7</sup>Now as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you — so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

The Macedonian Christians had grasped the truth that Christian faith and life is cruciform. The Christian life is in the shape of a cross. We look vertically to God who is the source of all we are and have. Then we act horizontally in compassion to our brothers, sisters, and children in need. We respond to the need.

Paul is doing something in these verses to motivate the Corinthians that I've always been afraid to do from the pulpit. He compares their giving to the giving of other congregations. Paul points to the sacrificial giving patterns of the Macedonian churches, using their passion and commitment to help the Corinthians get motivated to successfully complete their fund appeal 2,000 years ago. Paul uses an ancient technique of a healthy comparison in order to evoke competition among rivals. Telling the Corinthians about the “grace” (Charis) that God has given the Macedonian churches can only stir them to be more generous.

The generous and sacrificial pattern of giving from Philippian, Thessalonian, and Beroean churches in Macedonia is set up as a model of motivation for the believers in Corinth. And the paradox in verse 2 is that the greatest generosity comes from those who can least afford to give – from those who are confronted with “extreme poverty”.

The Macedonians knew personally who their Lord and Savior was. We see in their response the root of Christian stewardship – committed lives of faith. They acknowledged the Lordship of Christ in all things, declaring themselves and all they had to the cause of the Gospel. Their money was part of their spiritual worship, but they offered more than simply money – they gave themselves.

The Macedonians discovered the joy that comes when people give with a full heart. They knew that God lavishes us with gifts – daily bread, rain, sunshine, seed time and harvest, loved ones and dear friends, minds to think with, and voices with which to sing praise to God. These Macedonians knew they were claimed by another who graciously granted them the inheritance of courage, love, hope, and life eternal. They had surrendered the title of their lives to Jesus Christ.

Two thousand years later, we can have the same perspective as the Macedonian Christians when we see stewardship as nothing less than a complete lifestyle – a total accountability before God. Stewardship is what we do after we say we believe; that is, after we give our love, our loyalty and trust to God, from whom each and every aspect of our lives comes as a gift.

No amount of money is pleasing to the Lord until we first give ourselves to Christ in humble faith and trust. I am convinced that when we encounter a person with a stingy attitude, we are encountering a life which is not completely surrendered to God. We need to pray for that person.

And we do not want to miss verses 3-4 as they speak to our stewardship emphasis. “They voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.”

Sometimes as pastors and lay leaders, we forget that all members should have the opportunity to give. Sometimes, as stewardship leaders, we think we shouldn’t ask poor people to give. How wrong we are.

I remember, in my previous parish, when we were raising \$135,000 for our renovation project, we sent out letters to our more affluent members asking for a thousand-dollar gift.

When word got around to other members of St. John that we’d done that, I received a phone call from an elderly couple asking me to come to their house trailer. From previous visits, I knew they were living very simply on a small pension and a small Social Security check. They were tithers. They wondered why they hadn’t received a letter about the renovation.

I came into their little place, prayed with them, celebrated Holy Communion as I’d always done, and then he explained why they should have been asked to contribute to the renovation fund. They wanted to give more. “Let us decide, Pastor, what we can give to help!” he told me in his matter-of-fact way. That memorable experience taught me about stewardship. They mirrored the behavior of the Macedonians.

So, you see that Christian generosity is not dependent on the amount of one’s possessions, but rather Christian generosity is a matter of the heart. The sharing of their material possessions was natural for the Macedonians. Natural because their gift flowed from their prior commitment to Christ.

The Macedonians were, to use Luther's phrase, "Little Christs" to their neighbors. Their faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, became active in love, in being and becoming generous stewards.

In verse 9, Paul reminds us of the cross and our calling to be little Christs with these words . . . "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich".

In other words, Jesus gave up the advantages of being God's son to become a human servant. Jesus took on the death of a common criminal for our salvation. He willingly shared our history and our existence in order to make us rich as God's sons and daughters of righteousness. Our response as God's people is to have the courage to live, to love, and to share especially with our children and grandchildren that will benefit from leaving them a church in which their faith in Christ can be nurtured.

In Chapter 9, Paul goes on to remind us that "those who sow bountifully will reap bountifully and those who sow sparingly will reap sparingly". Blessings comes through sharing.

Each person, Paul says, should decide to give voluntarily without reluctance. God loves a cheerful giver because the act of joyful generosity mirrors God's heart. Giving cheerfully and freely reflects the very nature of God as He so freely gave His Son and so cheerfully blesses us every day of our lives, even in 2020!

God promises to multiply our resources when we are in step with God’s agenda to preach the Gospel, to raise and nurture our children in the Christian faith and provide the space to do it in, to administer the Sacraments, to encourage the young and the elderly. God promises to bless our ministries and our stewardship that we might pass on our faith to the coming generations.

A spiritually growing church is asking the questions, “How can we expand our outreach with the Gospel? How can we develop new ways in reaching out to people in Christ’s name? What does the Lord want us to do in this place and at this time? Why are we here and what is God’s mission for us? How can we be an inspiration to others?”

The Apostle Paul taught the Corinthians and is teaching us that the example of Christian generosity can and will inspire others. The generosity of many in this congregation can and will inspire others to support our Divinity ministries when we are “empowered by God and responding by grace” – our theme this year.

We are constantly reminded that Christian faith and life is cruciform. We look vertically to God who is the source of all we are and have. Then we act horizontally in compassion to our brothers, sisters, and children in need. We respond to the need. We respond by grace, empowered by God.

May the peace of God . . .

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