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Lent five B, March 17, 2024

“Excell in the grace of Giving”

2 Corinthians 8:1 – 9 and/or Memorize: 2 Cor. 8: 3

Have you ever heard of anybody begging to give their money away, especially when they're poor? That's exactly what happened to Paul. Great difficulty had struck the Jerusalem church. Paul turned to his gentile churches to gather an offering, giving an amazing sign of the unity of the church.

We don't know why, but the Macedonian church was not asked to help. They were poor, so was possible that Paul didn't want to embarrass them or perhaps, he didn't think their contribution would amount to much? Paul was a good pastor, so I expect he didn't want them to be embarrassed. He knew anything to the Lord was a worthy offering.

When the Macedonians heard about the offering, they begged Paul to allow them to provide a gift, and Paul reports they excelled at it, thereby becoming an example to the whole church. 1. Paul was now using the Macedonians as an example to the Corinthians, who were much wealthier.

The Corinthians had provided some of their gift, but a year later, had not completed it. The gift was going to Jerusalem. He had boasted of their giving previously and did not want them to be embarrassed, nor himself, in front of other believers, as they came to accept the rest of the gift.

As Randy reminds us, giving is meant to be a sacrifice. Sometimes, the sacrifice is felt; sometimes, because of the joy of giving, it is not even noticed. Perhaps you have wondered why is it that some people have more than others? Paul answers that question in 2 Corinthians 9: 10 - 11;

“For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous. And when we take your gifts to those who need them, they will thank God.”

2 Corinthians 9: 11 – 12 NLT

It is not that God loves some more than others; therefore, gives those He loves more. He blesses all for one purpose: “you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous.” 2. Paul perfectly understood our sixth key: “God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving.”

There had been an issue with the Corinthians. They may have been feeling that more was being asked of them. It may have been that they felt that Paul was asking them to make life easier for others, while harder for them. So, Paul wanted to make sure they understand perfectly what he was asking of them.

In a sense, he’s reminding them of Acts 2, where the believers shared all things together in common. When there was a need, those who had, provided for those who did not. It was not to make some poor at the expense of others, so he tells them in 2 Cor. 8:13, “Of course, I don’t mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality.”

I’m sure you’ve heard of the Nobel prize. Do you know who it is named for? That's correct, Alfred Nobel. Do you know how he made his fortune? He invented and produced dynamite, which came to be used in all sorts of ways beyond mining and construction, where he wanted it used. Like many inventors before him, Nobel believed his invention would make weapons so powerful that it would lead to the end of war. So much for that hope.

It was only by mistake that he created the Nobel prizes. His brother, who was in France died, but the newspaper printed his obituary. They titled it the “Merchant of Death Is Dead.” When Alfred read it, he decided to change his legacy.

When he died eight years later, he donated 94% of his wealth to found the prizes. He left the modern-day equivalent of 185 million dollars. The prizes recognize people who make great contributions to our society and to our peace. God provides His treasure to us so that we also can make a difference.

3. God provides all to all, but He does it for a reason: that we might be generous. We’re back to our very first key: “God owns everything. I’m His money manager.” He wants us to care for others, but he also knows us. After all, His Son became flesh, so He knows that “My heart always goes where I put God’s money.”

When my heart goes to God, I recognize that my destination has changed: “Heaven and the future New Earth, not this fallen one, is my home.” That understanding leads me to make different decisions about how I live my life. My life is a very small dot in time. Heaven is a line that goes on eternally, so therefore: “I should live not for the dot but for the line.”

I must confess that I like things. Look at my office, full of books; our home full of possessions. God has blessed us to such an extent that we have no worries if we suddenly had a crisis. Yet, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking things and money are our most important possessions. To correct that danger God reminds us that “Giving is the only antidote to materialism.”

In the last section of the book, Randy brings up an issue that he sees as crippling the church. We keep our giving secret. Greg Trost, our financial secretary, is quick to remind us that he is not able to share what an individual gives. In one sense, that is a good thing. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to compare ourselves which would only create envy or hurt.

At the same time, Randy challenges us. Because we keep giving a secret, if you wanted to learn or be mentored in how to be a better steward of the gifts God gives you, you wouldn't know who to ask. Here's an even greater problem. As a leader, I sometimes encourage you to be better stewards. I encourage you to tithe and be generous. What evidence do you have that we do either? Numerous times in his epistles, Paul says, look at me. Watch what I'm doing as an example to follow.

I want you to know what I say is not being prideful. I say it to be an example that we practice what we preach and to inspire generosity. Last year, Roxann and I gave to Christian organizations and community – supported non-profits, 27% of what we earned.

The organization that received the greatest share of those gifts was Good Shepherd. 61% of what we gave was to help accomplish our mission of being “Everyday Disciples: Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!” Those percentages mean nothing. Being transparent here's what that means. We returned to God through Good Shepherd over \$29,000 to support His ministry.

Neither the percentages or the amount really reveal the impact of those gifts. Because all of us gave, people came to Christ; the Word was preached; the Sacraments were celebrated; people in need were helped; hungry people were fed. People were consoled; those feeling lonely were comforted and God was glorified.

4. I can't begin to tell you all the joy it gives us to be able to share generously. Both of us have the spiritual gift of giving, so it truly excites us to give. We have sought to be obedient to God to lead the flock He called us to shepherd. Part of that leadership is to support it with our gifts of time, talent and treasure as good examples to you.

If you want to grow in your stewardship of God's gifts there are a few people who have offered to talk with you confidentially. In addition, we are exploring some programs that we hope to offer in the near future to help us to live as better stewards of God in all areas of life.

How did I begin tithing, giving 10% of my income to church? When I was ordained, I believed that pastor's should tithe as an example. When my first marriage ended in a divorce, I had to pay child support. At first, I thought I would have to decrease my giving, but God led me not to do that and provided what I needed. When Roxann and I married we both wanted to tithe.

I have to confess I was probably a legalist when I first began tithing. This is something you have to do. I also thought it was the goal of giving. Only as I grew in Christ, did I come to understand two things. First, giving 10% is not the ceiling of giving, but the floor. 5. Second, Jesus says to be generous, so we experience the joy of giving.

God joyfully gave His Son. For the joy of giving, Jesus gave His life for us. He willingly went to the cross, so that we don't have to live apart from Him eternally. Please do not give out of obligation, for there is no joy in that. Jesus reminds us how to give: "Give as I have given to you!"

How valuable was the gift God gave to buy us back from the power of sin, death and the devil? Yet, God offered Him with joy. We give out of the joy of serving our Lord and Savior, which is the best way to give.

I'm sure we're all familiar with Dicken's story of Scrooge. Because of his focus on keeping; his fear of losing, Scrooge had lost everything, even though he was rich. He was a miserable man bent on inflicting his misery on all others.

Then, in a night, he miraculously gets to see his past, present and future through the ghosts of Christmas, the day of God's greatest gift-giving, and he is transformed. He becomes contagiously happy. 6. What transformed Scrooge? He got an eternal perspective, which is always transformative!

He learned something that, as Christians, we already know: the joy of giving. We are reminded of it in Acts 20: 35 where Jesus is quoted as saying, "There is more happiness in giving than receiving." Who of us has not experienced that kind of joy? 7. We have been blessed with more than we need, but don't worry, we know exactly what to do with it: Give it away!

Count me in: Will you increase your giving rather than your standard of living?