

July 16, 2006
Pentecost 6

"How To Be More Generous with Your Money"

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-9

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵ And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. ⁶ So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ 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. ⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The other day, while waiting in line at the market, I noticed the man ahead of me pulling out a roll of money to pay for groceries. He peeled off a hundred dollar bill and handed it to the clerk. I am sure the roll of bills in his pocket was important to him. He probably used the money to pay for food, gas, rent, and meals at a restaurant. Money is not something bad if it is used in the right way. We don't want our money to lead us to become greedy and selfish.

Jesus warned against the danger of thinking too much about money. "What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Psalm 62 tells us, "Though your riches increase do not set your heart on them." Most of us here this morning would have a tough time handling a large infusion of cash without having it corrupt us and hurt us. "The love of money, the ungodly love of money, is the root of all evil.

There is a good way to love money and a bad way. To respect money as an undeserved gift from God is a blessing. To use money to help other people is also a blessing. Jesus said, "It is better to give than to receive." There is a real joy in being generous with your money, especially if this comes from knowing how generous and loving Jesus has been with you. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich." When you give generously out of the love that Jesus has shown to you, you actually enjoy opportunities to be even more generous. This morning we want to talk to you about money, not about making money, but being more generous with the money the Lord has given to you, whatever your income level may be.

Look at others who give generously

Paul held before the wealthy Christians in Corinth the example of some very poor people

in Macedonia who had given generously to help needy people in Jerusalem. The purpose was not to shame them into giving more, but to show the wealthy people that they had the same source of blessings in Jesus that these poor people had in their lives. "And now brothers, we want you to know the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity." The grace of God welled up in the lives of these very poor people and led them to be generous with others, even though they were going through extreme poverty. The picture that comes to my mind is that of traveling through a desert and finding a spring of fresh cool water bubbling up out the dry sand. That is the way it is with God's grace, his underserved love and kindness that wells up in people and leads them to be generous even though they are very poor.

We don't know why the Christians in Macedonia were so poor. Perhaps this was an area of the world where there weren't many jobs and opportunities to earn money. It may be that the Christians had been marginalized and lost their jobs because of their faith. The Greek word used here has the thought of being squeezed tightly.

During the Great Depression millions of people lost their jobs. My father tells how the train would slow down as it went past the family farm. People would jump off and sleep in an old barn near the tracks. Then they would come down to the farmhouse and ask for a sandwich or whatever there might be to eat. Right now as a speak thousands of people are dying from starvation, many of them Christian, in places like Chad and the Sudan area, driven from their homes and farms by religious and political turmoil. Even though the Christians in Macedonia were dirt poor, they wanted to help gather money for the needy Christians in Jerusalem who were persecuted, lost their jobs and were driven from their homes. Paul says, "They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."

These people were amazing. Paul did not have to plead with them for money to help others in need. They pleaded with him for the opportunity to get involved. "Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in the this service to the saints." You can almost hear Paul saying, "Are you sure you want to do this? Do you want to keep more money for yourself?" The people wanted to get involved. They were given the gift of being generous and the gift of faith that allowed them to believe the Lord would take care of them, even if they went over board in being generous. They gave themselves to the Lord's will. Christians who are generous experience the added joy of seeing how the Lord takes care of them and even gives them more resources to be even more generous.

I recall talking to a man in Tucson who told how his eyes were opened to the joy of generous giving by observing the giving pattern in other Christians. He told how he was asked to help count the offerings in his home church. He noticed that some of the elderly widows who were very poor actually gave more than he did with his good paying job. He thought to himself, "If they can be generous with the money they are giving and they have so little, I can be more generous in giving to the Lord." He found that the Lord always came through and gave him more than enough to raise his family.

You never want to point to the example of other Christians who are more generous to shame the Christians who are less generous into giving more. It does not work that way. It does not work in raising kids and it does not work in Christian giving. Think of the frustrated parent who says to the son whose room is always a mess, "Why can't you keep

your room neat like your brother?" What Paul is doing with these Christians in Corinth is showing them that they have the same source of salvation, the same source of love, the same source of grace as the Christians in Macedonia.

Look at your blessings in Jesus

Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth of how blessed they were. "So we urged Titus, since he had made an earlier beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in earnestness and in your love for us, see that you also excel in the this grace of giving." The word for excel has the picture of water flowing from out of the ground with such force that it overflows everywhere. Have you ever seen a fire hydrant broken off by a car? The water shoots up into the air, and runs everywhere. Paul says that is how these Christians in Corinth were. They excelled in everything. They were like fountains of water bubbling up out of the ground, and flowing everywhere.

Look at the faith that was pouring forth in their lives, not only a faith in Jesus for salvation, but a faith that said, "I know that the Lord is taking care of us." Their love for Jesus was bubbling up and running all over the place when it came to taking about the Lord and the blessings they had in him. These people bubbled with knowledge, a knowledge of God's love and the plan of salvation for the world. They were eager to share what they knew with other people. Their lives bubbled up with earnestness and love. If all these blessings were flowing forth in their lives in such abundance, generous giving out of love for the Lord could also easily be part of their lives. "See that you also excel in the grace of giving."

Paul says he was testing the sincerity of their love by comparing it to others. The word for testing in the Greek came from the tests that medical doctors took to be qualified to practice. And what were the test results? What kind of love was flowing up and bubbling up in their lives? It was the pure and holy love that Jesus had for them, the same love that Jesus had for the generous Christians in Macedonia. I don't like comparing myself to other people, because either I will feel rotten for not being as good as they are, or I will feel self righteous because I may think I am better than they are. However, if I compare my source of love and my source of salvation, which is Jesus, I find that it is the same as other people.

Listen now to what Paul says about Jesus. Listen to how rich you are. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." When it comes to the riches we have in Christ, we are all the same. When I look out at this group of people, I am safe in saying that some of you have more money in the bank, more investments, or more income than others. I look at you and I look at myself and I am astounded at how rich we actually in Christ. Jesus was rich. He left the glory of his heavenly Father, emptied himself, became a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross. He emptied himself and became poor so that we can be rich, rich in the love that our Father has for us, rich in the blessings he has for us in this life and for all eternity. Today, Jesus even gives us his body and blood in the Holy Sacrament. That makes us the richest people in the world. You know the grace our Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are looking into ourselves for the source of being loved and accepted by God, then we are hopelessly lost. Imagine having a credit card and building up a huge debt, but then not being able to make the payments. The debt of sin is enormous. Even if you had the wealth of Bill Gates, or even if you were one of the nicest people in the world, even you change your life and get rid of bad behavior, nothing you produce can pay even one single sin. There is a fountain the bubbles up, there is a source, there is place where payment was made. In the wounds of Jesus and his precious blood, we find the source of our peace with God, the source of being forgiven and loved by God. "There is a fountain filled with blood. Drawn from Emmanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood. Lose all their guilty stains."

How rich are you? Listen again the words read to you from the first lesson this morning in Lamentations. "Because of the Lord's mercy we are not consumed." "His compassions never fail. They are new every morning." I can say to myself, "The Lord is my portion. Therefore I will wait for him." The Lord is your portion. That word has the thought of ownership. You own the Lord. That makes you the richest people in the world. It has been said, "You cannot out give God." He has already given so much to us, in so many ways. That makes it possible for us to give generously to others. If I can use my money to support bringing God's Word to other people, then they too can share in these riches we have in Christ. What a privilege! Amen.