

2 CORINTHIANS 8 : 1 - 9

Stewardship Sunday (1 of 3), November 10, 2024

Smith

LIVE A LIFE OF HUMBLE GENEROSITY

1 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very 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 Lord's people.

5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 6 So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 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.

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 sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

The true Christian Church does not have dues. We do not charge our members for our services. We do not tax our people. There is no pew rental fee. Tithing-- Tithing was an Old Testament command about giving ten percent, but it's no longer a law for Christians. We may talk about that another time. But what about things we give that are not money?

Paul had a lot to say to this church, the one in Corinth at the crossroads of ancient Greece. There were lots of troubles there-- so many that he wrote two letters to them totaling 29 chapters, more than any other church in the New Testament. He has written to them about the way we are saved through the blood of Jesus. This was in chapter 5 of this letter. And he's been defending himself against some verbal attacks from a few people in Corinth who questioned his authority and his doctrine. But Paul was set apart by Jesus Christ himself to take the gospel into Greece and other place, and he had been up north in Macedonia to places like Philippi and Thessalonica. Now he was working in the south, in Athens and here in Corinth.

One of the verbal attacks against Paul seems to have been that he was profiting too much from his preaching. "You're fleecing the sheep and lining your pockets, Paul!" But that's not what he was doing at all. **First: There was a genuine need.** The Christians in Jerusalem and the surrounding villages were impoverished. There was a genuine need for help for them: an offering was being collected by many people in many places to help the believers back in the

churches there, who were not being helped by the Roman government nor from the Jewish synagogues. The Christians were treated as outsiders, and that made hard times like these very hard times indeed.

Second: Other churches had done amazing things. Even churches here in Greece, Paul says. Up in Macedonia, in Philippi, for example, without being asked, they pleaded with Paul to be allowed to help, even though they themselves were not wealthy at all, giving “beyond their ability.” More than they could afford, like the woman Jesus once saw giving her last pennies or half-pennies in the collection box at the temple. The Lord said, **“She gave from her poverty-- all that she had to live on.”**¹

Third: Those poor churches up north gave “in rich generosity.” Now, I don’t want this to become a Greek lesson but this word, **ἀπλότης**,² means “a single-minded devotion.” Out of the bottomless poverty of the Macedonian people, God produced a single-minded desire to help that meant that they threw away all their doubts, any aim or desire apart from that one thought: to help; and they concentrated on, as Jesus says, **“the one thing needful.”** This produced a result that was more than anyone could have ever expected. It was an amazing, humble generosity.

By giving themselves first to the Lord, they found by digging deeply into the Scriptures that there can be no better thank-you to God, no better first fruits, than in the giving of their very souls; to give everything to God and set aside all earthly goals and desires.

Now, the role of thanks in the lives of Christians is important to remember. I’m not just talking about giving money or about our offerings. Let’s step into the realm of service, of prayer, of consideration for each other; of love. All of these things grow up and outward and bloom like flowers that come from the rich soil of thanks to Jesus. As Paul says: **“I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God (that is, those who are saved by faith in Christ) may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone”** (Titus 3:8).

What is the motive, the right motive, for everything that we do? Well, consider what the wrong motive would be. For even things we do that strictly conform to God’s holy law are not truly good works if they are done only out of fear, or obligation, or because they are commanded, or if we do them because we hope for a reward. Jesus makes this clear in the Sermon on the Mount when he condemns the offerings given by the Pharisees, because they were done **“in front of people in order to be seen by them”** (Matthew 6:1). But faith in

¹ Mark 12:44

² Pronounced *hap-LŌ-tās*.

Jesus produces love, and this is the love that shows itself in the things we do which we can call “good works” and that we do out of love and thanks for God.

If somebody has the wrong motive; if he wants to manipulate God into doing things by pretending to be a devoted follower and disciple, then he sins just like any other sin. It does not matter that such a sin was brought into the sanctuary of the church, as if we could argue our way out of a traffic ticket by saying, “I was only trying to do your holy will, O Lord!” because he is not fooled. He knows what is in our hearts, in our thoughts. He sees what truly sits there behind our motives:

My glory... sin.

My way... sin.

My opinion... sin.

My method for everything ... sin.

Do things my way because I know best... sin.

Do this because I want to make changes in the world that will be good in my eyes... sin.

But: Christ lived and died for me, and rose again, and has a place waiting for me in heaven. My sins, wretched as they are, and as frightening to me as they always get, have been lifted away by hands of Jesus raised up by others to be sure that he died, and he did die. He did rise again. He does have a place waiting for me and for you and for everyone who puts our faith in him forever in heaven.

And now I want to thank him and serve him. Now, we have a motive that is right, and that lines right up with the will of God.

So how will I serve? His commandments give a magnificent outline of service, beginning with the reminder there in Exodus 20: **“I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of the land of slavery”** (20:2). There’s that motive right in the preamble to the Ten Commandments. What has God done, and how can I respond?

As Paul outlines for the Corinthians, it is first of all in humble generosity. It is that singleness of purpose that says, “I want to thank God.” When I take care of my life, of my house, of my family; when I care about the well-being of the people around me, not that they always do what I say, but that they believe in what Jesus did, and that they love him, too. That is a fine beginning to living a thankful life. A life that says, every day, **“Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let these gifts-- whatever they are-- to us be blessed.**

Amen.