

Excel in Everything

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

The Olympic Games are coming up within the month and athletes all over the world are preparing to compete. They have diligently prepared for years for the chance to go to London and represent their country as the eyes of the world look on! These athletes have excelled in their individual disciplines. In our scripture today Paul said to the Christians of Corinth, who had benefited so richly from God's grace, that they had excelled in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and love. The Corinthians had many spiritual gifts and Paul encouraged them to especially excel in the gift of giving.

Jerusalem was experiencing hard times and the church of Jerusalem was experiencing even harder times. (We know how this is with the economy in Michigan being in hard times for the past several years.) Paul had organized that the churches that he helped to establish would provide an over-and-above collection for the Church of Jerusalem. (This is like the special offerings that we have taken for the victims of the floods, hurricanes, wide fires, and other natural or man-made disasters.) The Mother Church had become poor, and it was Paul's desire that all the Gentiles' churches should remember and help that Church which was their mother in the faith. So here he reminds the Corinthians of their duty and urges them to generosity.

He used five arguments to appeal to them to give generously.

First Paul cites the example of others. He told them how generous the Macedonian Churches had been. They were poor and in trouble but they gave all they had, far more than anyone could have expected. It is said at the Jews Feast of Purim there is a regulation which says that, however poor a person is, they must

find someone poorer than themselves and give that person a gift. It is not always those who are most wealthy who are most generous; often those who have least to give are the most ready to give. As the common saying has it, “It is the poor who help the poor,” because they know what poverty is like.

Paul then cited the example of Jesus Christ. For Paul the sacrifice of Jesus did not begin on the Cross. It did not even begin with his birth. It began in heaven, when he laid his glory by and consented to come to earth. From the splendor of heaven Christ came to the squalor of earth. The Incarnation was an incomprehensible renunciation of spiritual and material glory. The One who was rich, who had everything, became poor, making Himself nothing (Phil. 2:7). He assumed humankind’s debt of sin and paid for it with His life (Phil. 2:8). He became what they were (poor) so that they could become what He was and is (rich). Paul’s challenge to the Christian is, “With that tremendous example of generosity before you, how can you hold back?”

Third Paul cited their past record. They had excelled in everything. Now he asked them not to lag behind in giving. He urged them to live true to their own highest standards and always do their best, knowing that God will use their best for the building up of others in the kingdom!

Fourth Paul stressed the necessity of putting fine feeling into fine action. The Corinthians had been the first to feel the appeal of this giving plan for the Mother Church. But a feeling which remains only a feeling, a pity which remains a pity only of the heart, a fine desire that never turns into a fine deed, is a sadly reduced and frustrated thing. The tragedy of life so often is, not that we have no high impulses, but that we fail to turn them into actions, especially when we have an opportunity to act.

Fifth, Paul reminded them that life has a strange way of evening things up. Far more often than not we find that it is measured to us with the same measure as we measure to others. Life has a way of repaying bounty with bounty, and the sparing spirit with the sparing spirit.

So Paul sent Titus to receive the offering from the Corinthian church. Here they had an opportunity to demonstrate their love for God and their pastor by giving generously to a cause that was near and dear. No, they had never worshipped in Jerusalem or met the Christians of the Jerusalem church, but Paul reminded them that all are part of the one Body of Christ, and what effects one member also affects the other members of the church.

In writing to the Romans Paul had mentioned the gift (God-given spiritual ability) of “contributing to the needs of others” (Rom. 12:8). The right use of this divine gift was to give generously. Paul himself had certainly given unsparingly to the Corinthians, and they in turn had professed their affection for him (2 Cor. 8:11). Paul wanted them to excel in their “giving” because giving expresses love (1 John 3:11, 16-18).¹

This scripture also points out a few more lessons for us. The Corinthians were so wrapped up in the gifts of the Spirit that they had neglected the graces of the Spirit, including the grace of giving. The Macedonian churches had an “abundance of deep poverty” (2 Cor. 8:2), and yet they abounded in their liberality. The Corinthians had an abundance of spiritual gifts, yet they were lax in keeping their promise and sharing in the collection.

A friend of mine canvassed the members of her congregation about a special offering that they needed for a special ministry. When she called the pastor she

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:573

was informed that the pastor would not give as they never gave to any offering, including the general Sunday offering. The pastor argued that the ministry of their spiritual gifts was a substitute for generous giving. That's like saying "I teach a Sunday School class, so I don't have to give!" "I visit the sick as an elder so I don't give! I help clean the building so my family does not give to the offering. These are not explanations—these are excuses. The Christian who remembers that their gifts are gifts, will be motivated to give to others and support other ministries of the church. Unlike pastors and missionaries who have argued that, since they devote their whole time in serving the Lord, they are not obligated to give, Paul argued since they are wonderfully gifted from God, they ought to want to give even more!

I have been attending church all my life, as many of you, I have endured many offering appeals. We have listened to sad stories about unbelievable needs. We have laughed at old jokes that were supposed to make it easier to part with our money. We have been scolded, shamed, and almost threatened. Usually this does not motivate us to give more. Mark Twain said that he was so sickened by the long appeal that he not only did not give what he planned to give, but he took a bill out of the plate!

Paul did not order the Corinthians to give. He was careful not to threaten or coerce them. He did not say that their failure to participate in this collection indicated that they had no part in Christ. He did not say that his words were a commandment, or that the people were required to give in order to be included in the body of Christ and be saved. He made no impossible promises to them. Paul did not suggest their well-being was in any way tied to their eagerness to contribute. He never said that things would go better with them, that they would be blessed or that any reward would come to them as a result of their generosity. He

did not preach the prosperity gospel that suggests that if you give to God, then God will give back to you in some divine multiple – as if stewardship were really venture capital with a guaranteed return. He didn't use any of the stewardship or fundraising tools that many congregations employ.²

Instead, Paul contrasted the attitude of the Macedonians with that of the Corinthians. He pointed out that the Macedonians were following the example of the Lord: they were poor, yet they gave. The Corinthians said that they loved Paul; now he asked them to prove that love by sharing in the offering. Gracious giving is an evidence of love—love for Christ, love for God's servants who have ministered to us, and love for those who have special needs that we are able to help meet.

No, rather than threats, Paul encouraged them to give themselves to God, remembering how generous and gracious Jesus had been to them, and to give sacrificially to God. (2 Cor. 8:9). Paul didn't teach that we give to get, but to show our love and gratitude to God for what God has already done in our lives. Generosity is part of our character as Christians. It is who we become in baptism and who God calls us to be, together, for the further glory of his holy name. Christians excel in the gift of giving.

Gracious giving is a matter of faith: we obey God and believe that He will meet our needs as we help to meet the needs of others. As the Jews in the wilderness gathered the manna each day, so we must depend on God to “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). We must not waste or squander what God gives us, neither must we hoard it. In the will of God, it is right to save, but not to hoard.

² The Christian Century, June 27, 2013, Living by the Word, P 20

Remember the Jews were allowed to save Friday's manna to eat on the Sabbath, and the manna did not decay [Ex. 16:22–26].^{3 4}

This week my family has received many extraordinary blessings as this congregation and the women that attended the women's retreat prayed for Isaac. God even sent two master nurses and a master physical therapy to help and advice. We have learned so much more about the limitations of our health insurance, but with many kind receptionists and customer service workers we were able to change Isaac's primary care provider and he should have his operation this week. This has been example of people excelling in gracious giving in our lives.

God has graciously given to us so that we can be a blessing to others. My sisters and brothers, go and excel in gracious giving!

³Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. 2 Co 8:5

⁴Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letters to the Corinthians*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 227