

Excel in the Grace of Giving!

(2 Corinthians 8:1–12) ¹ 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. ¹⁰ And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

In Christ Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, dear fellow redeemed,

My dad used to describe himself as a “Jack of all trades, master of none.” It was his way of saying that while he tried his hand at a lot of things, he wasn’t an expert at any of them. Sure, he could replace a washer in a faucet, but that didn’t make him a master plumber. Maybe you can relate. I know I can. I try my hand at a lot of things, but I don’t seem to do any of them especially well. That’s ok when it comes to the interests I have and the hobbies I pursue, but not when it comes to my faith-life. I may never be anything more than a Saturday mechanic or a Monday morning quarterback, but I dare never be only a Sunday Christian—someone who merely dabbles in religion. That’s because Christianity isn’t a hobby. It’s our life. It’s who we are through the faith God gives us in Jesus. Knowing this, we can’t allow ourselves to backslide or even sit idle in our faith-life. No, we want to constantly move forward in faith. This is the encouragement that St. Paul has for us. He wants us to excel in every aspect of our walk with Christ, including the worship we give Jesus as we offer up ourselves and our gifts to the Lord. To this end St. Paul urges you and me to “Excel in the Grace of Giving.”

Paul isn’t an army general ordering us to excel “...or else!” He’s a pastor, equipping us to excel with the power of God’s promises—promises that change lives forever. Paul has experienced the power of these promises in his own life and has witnessed the miracle repeated countless times in his ministry. Today he wants you and me to see what God’s grace can accomplish. He offers us this example: “**now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ²Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity**” (2 Corinthians 8:1-2). Paul has brought the gospel of Jesus from Jerusalem to Macedonia. He has told sinners there all about God’s love for them in Christ. Those who heard and believed now had peace with God and self for the first time in their lives. But that peace was quickly threatened when neighbors and family ridiculed and disowned them for their newborn faith. Those baby Christians lost everything, many even their jobs, all because they followed Jesus. How tempting it must have been for them to run away from Christ, back to the comforts they had known. But in the end, it was no contest because not all the comforts in the world could replace their new-found joy in Jesus. In fact, you might say, as Paul does, that

their extreme poverty was what really helped them focus on this truth, that in Jesus, they had everything they needed.

Of course, it's one thing to say that and quite another to live it. By God's grace, the Christians in Macedonia did both. Their family and friends had forsaken them, but now they had a new family—in Christ. They had each other, as well as brothers and sisters in the faith who lived in distant lands – like the Christians in Jerusalem who, at this time, were suffering the terrible effects of a severe famine. Those Jewish Christians were in dire need. As a labor of love, Paul was gathering a collection to help them.

As you read Paul's words, you get the sense that while he may have mentioned this offering in Macedonia, he didn't have any thought that the Christians there could or even should participate in it. **“Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:3-4).** Those poor Christians were barely scraping together enough for themselves to live on. Yet when they heard about this opportunity to serve Christ and others with their offerings, they begged Paul to let them participate—not with a token gift, but with one that took the apostle and his team by surprise: **““For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability...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” (2 Corinthians 8:3,5).** With these words Paul is reminding himself as much as he is us that this response to God's grace shouldn't have been a surprise. In hindsight, it all adds up. Without God's gracious gift of a Savior, these people were the walking dead, doomed to an eternity of misery in hell. Jesus rescued them from that fate. This offering gave them a way to gratefully acknowledge that they belonged to him who bought them back from sin's curse. What kind of “thank you” gift do you send to God who already has everything? You take the love he's given you and show to others. After all, this is in keeping with the will of him who will one day say to us: **“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).**

The Macedonian Christians excelled in this grace of giving. Their example encouraged Paul to believe that God's undeserved love would have the same effect on the Christians in Corinth. So, Paul sent his fellow pastor, Titus, to gather the offering. Titus had helped the Corinthians plan their gifts months earlier, but some problems in the church had splintered the congregation and delayed the offering. Patient, pastoral care resolved the conflict so that Paul could now write: **“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” (2 Corinthians 8:7).** The clear teaching of God's love in Christ had not only turned conflict into harmony, it caused the Christians to grow in every way—in their trust in God's promises and in the way they spoke and applied God's Word to every circumstance of life. Those Christians knew how to use God's promises to help each other chase away all fears and doubts. Pastors and people cared for each other with God's unflinching love. Now Paul wanted these same caring souls to see this offering as an opportunity to express their love with their gifts of money.

Paul realizes he's dealing with a sensitive subject. He goes to great lengths to make sure that his people do not misunderstand his intentions. **“I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others” (1 Corinthians 8:8).** An offering must be something freely, happily given otherwise it should be called dues or a membership fee. Paul isn't establishing a church tax, nor does he want to shame Christians into giving a gift. Instead he's offering them a chance to test the sincerity of their Christian love. The test isn't for Paul's benefit. He just cited all the reasons why he knows they will pass. No, the test is for the Corinthians' benefit. Think of the fellow who has just had back surgery to correct a condition so painful that he could barely walk. The surgeon knows the procedure was a success. But for the patient, the confidence comes when he puts the surgeon's work to the test by standing up and taking those first pain-free steps. The Corinthian Christians can do the same as they put grace to the test. But before they take this step, Paul goes out of his way to remind them about the

source of this love they are testing—where it comes from: **“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”** (2 Corinthians 8:9). The Christians are not testing love that they produce in and of themselves. They are testing the love of God at work in their hearts and lives.

In one of my devotional readings last week, I came across a powerful illustration of this love of God: A homeless man sits next to the exhaust vent at the local dry cleaners. There he can stay warm during even the coldest nights. A lawyer arrives to pick up his suits. He reaches into his pocket and hands the homeless man a \$20 bill. A few hours later a banker comes by and invites the man to lunch. He spends an hour of his time with the man and then picks up the tab. Later in the day a woman pulls up in her Mercedes and sees the man taking a nap. She gently nudges him on the shoulder and asks him his name. Then she gives him the keys to her Mercedes and tells the man that the garage door opener is on the visor and her purse with all her cash, credit cards, and account numbers is on the passenger’s seat. He can have it all in exchange for his spot next to the exhaust fan.

The first two scenarios are believable. The last one is unimaginable, and yet this fictional story pales in comparison to what it is that Jesus has really done for us. Jesus left God’s side in heaven to be born into our fallen world. Why? For no other reason than to help us poor souls. We were spiritually bankrupt. We didn’t have a penny of the holiness we need to live with God, so Jesus came here to live and love in our place and so credit us with his perfection—the holiness we need to claim a mansion in heaven. It’s amazing, isn’t it? We came into this world owing God a debt of sin so massive that not even eternity would be long enough for us to pay it off. But now we owe nothing because the same Jesus who has given us his holiness has canceled our debt. He took your place under the death sentence of God’s wrath. Jesus suffered your torment in hell and then rose from the dead to prove that your sentence has been served and God’s justice has been satisfied once and for all!

Yes, you know this grace in the most intimate way, not as something made up or imagined. This is the grace God shows you every moment of every day. This is the grace you put it to the test as you bring your sins and failures to God. Grace never fails. For you know the peace it brings your troubled conscience. You know how it calms your fears and drives away your doubts. You know how it makes the hope of heaven the surest thing on earth. This is the same grace that gives us great joy as we offer all that we are and have in thankful service to our Grace-Giver.

It’s with all this in mind that Paul offers us such wonderful advice. He suggests that we let God’s love finish what it has started in us so that we might master this grace of giving. Here’s a practical example. During these last months you’ve heard a great deal about the building project we hope to undertake here at Mount Olive. You’ve heard about the blessings it might bring to our children and many others in the community. Perhaps you’ve even thought about offering a gift to help make these plans become a reality. But no sooner is the desire born in us and we find ourselves distracted by thoughts like these: “Can I really afford it?” “I don’t have much to give. What will such a small amount mean to a project so big?” Listen to Paul: **“Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means.”**¹² **For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have”** (2 Corinthians 8:11-12). Once again Paul speaks words of grace. While God will certainly make any gift you give a blessing to others, first he wants to make it a blessing to you as he confirms in your life the truth and power of his promises, beginning with this assurance – God doesn’t expect us to give him something we don’t have. Any gift we make is to come from the means that God himself supplies. More than that, it won’t be the amount of the gift that makes it acceptable to God. Remember, the holiness of Christ is ours through faith in him. This holiness covers us and all that we do. This is God’s promise and our great joy: God does not see you or me as a “Jack of all trades, master of none.” By faith we excel in his sight. We and our offerings are holy and pleasing to God always and only for Jesus’ sake. Amen.