

Text: 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Theme: OVERFLOW IN THE GRACE OF GIVING

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Several years ago, in Monterey, CA, a coastal city south of San Francisco, a peculiar problem arose— not with the people, but with the *pelicans* who resided there. Monterey is a hot fishing spot, and the fisherman used to feed the pelicans the leftovers after they were done cleaning their fish. After a while, the pelicans became fat, lazy and content in being fed that way. Eventually, the fishermen grew tired of the mess the pelicans would leave, so they found other ways to dispose of the fish-cleaning leftovers. The trouble was, after being fed that way for so long, the pelicans had forgotten how to fish for themselves. Many of them began to grow thin, and some even died from starvation. Eventually, the problem was solved by bringing in pelicans from another area who were accustomed to fishing to feed themselves. After a while, by following the example of the newly introduced pelicans, the Monterey pelicans re-learned how to fish.

This worked well for the pelican dilemma, and often examples work well with people too. The Apostle Paul, in the text we are considering today, did that very thing. He used the example of other Christians to gently encourage the Christians in the city of Corinth in a collection that was being gathered at the time for fellow Christians in Jerusalem who were in great need. The Corinthians had some spiritual issues that Paul was happy to hear from his co-worker Titus, had largely been corrected. In fact, he even wrote, 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.**

If you look at that Greek word Paul used to describe how they were *excelling*, it literally means to “*overflow*”— like a container that you fill with water until the water rushes over the side and spills onto the counter. That's what was happening to the Corinthians spiritually. And it was all God's doing. In fact, Paul uses that concept of *grace*, God's undeserved love for us, as the underlying reason for this spiritual change in the Corinthians. His second letter to them was intended, among other things, to be a source of encouragement to them to continue on that path. And there's a reason God had this letter included in the Scriptures for our encouragement and growth: because we need it too. Like the Christians at Corinth almost 2,000 years ago, we've been changed by that same Gospel from the moment we were baptized and as we continue to grow in God's Word. We too have been turned around and have many opportunities to reflect God's love in our words and actions. And that includes the giving of our time, our abilities and our treasures— all of which come from our gracious Lord. So, with God's gospel motivation, we can all **OVERFLOW IN THE GRACE OF GIVING.**

This gospel motivation really starts with God's grace to us. It too is a grace of *giving*. It finds its focus in the Father's giving of his only Son for our salvation. Paul references this at the end of our text, when he says, 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.** To be honest, this is really the heart of Christian stewardship. When we put the focus in our worship and in our life on Christ and what he's done for us, we can't help but respond to the love he first showed to us. Jesus gave up everything so that we could have everything eternally. He became **"poor"** so we could become **"rich"** spiritually.

Add to this the fact that everything we have comes from our Lord. Yes, we work to receive wages to live our lives, but where would we be if God hadn't first given us the skills to work that job— or the job itself, for that matter. There is nothing that we have in this life that God didn't give to us. And, of course, the most important gift we've been given is his Son Jesus, who won salvation for us. So when you consider all this, you can't help but be overflowing with *thankfulness*.

What do you do when you're overwhelmed with kindness and love and thanks? You respond in some way— and often, it's a very generous response. If your garage needs to be rebuilt, and your neighbor who's experienced in construction takes time to help you, your heart is filled with appreciation and thanks. So when he asks for your help the next weekend with a different project, you're eager to step up to help. Actually, a lot of your response depends upon just how moved you are by what you've experienced. So your *attitude* becomes really important when it comes to your stewardship response.

This is what the Apostle Paul zeroes in on in our text: the *attitude* when it comes to giving. Remember, everything we have comes from God. So he doesn't need anything from us. And yet he *asks* us to give. But the most important thing to him is not the amount, but the *attitude* when it comes to our giving. In the next chapter of 2 Corinthians, as Paul continues to encourage the Corinthians in their offering, he says, in chapter 9, verse 7, **Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.** This Holy Spirit-inspired statement is essentially our Lord helping us to keep the focus in our giving on our *attitude*. When Paul says in our text that he wants the Corinthians, and by extension us, to **"excel (or overflow) in the grace of giving,"** he's not talking about the amount of gifts, but the attitude in our giving.

God wants us to be *excited* to give. But in our materialistic world and dealing with our

sinful nature every day, that can often be difficult. We look at the bills and the other obligations we have— not to mention all those things we like to do— and well, generous giving can seem very challenging. But it's not about the amount. It's about what motivates us to give and our attitude about the giving. The generosity will naturally come when the motivation and attitude are where they need to be at.

Sometimes we just need an example— like the pelicans. Paul used the example of the churches in Macedonia, an area further to the north of Corinth. Actually, he was there when he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians. He had seen firsthand their giving attitude. They were struggling in great poverty for a number of reasons. And yet they gave generously toward the offering that was going to the Jerusalem Christians. In fact, as Paul indicates, they gave even more than anyone expected they could. They trusted that the Lord would always provide for them, so they could be generous. But beyond that, they had seen that grace of God in their lives, and they couldn't help but want to respond to it. No one twisted their arms. They actually pleaded for the opportunity to participate. They felt privileged to participate in this important offering collection, and gave with an attitude of loving response to God's love toward them. And that was a shining example for the Corinthians— and us— to follow. And notice that Paul doesn't mention an amount. It was all about the *attitude*.

Paul then shares this to bring his point home: 8 **I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others.** His goal in sharing the Macedonian example was to encourage the Corinthians to eagerly and generously participate in this important offering being gathered. But he didn't force them or guilt them into it. He wanted to move them by reminding them of the love of Christ, but also by sharing how that love was reflected by their brothers and sisters in Macedonia. This is gospel motivation, not coercion. When Christ's love motivates us, it yields giving that overflows.

So how do we apply that to *our* giving? Simply put, when we are fed with God's Word, we can't help but be filled by the gospel that sparks the proper attitude of giving. It makes us a *cheerful* giver. And a generous one too. So if you find it difficult to give— and giving includes financial gifts, but also gifts of our time and talents— try filling yourself even more with the love of Christ. If you want to excel and overflow in the grace of giving, start by excelling in the taking in of God's grace through his holy Word. And then, look around and see the examples of generous and heartfelt givers. I see it every day in my work as a Christian Giving Counselor, and it really

moves you and gives you an example of what it means to be a cheerful giver.

With God's help, you can **OVERFLOW IN THE GRACE OF GIVING**. Then you too can be an example for others, and then experience how God blesses ministry through your generosity.
AMEN.