

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Money is a huge part of our lives. Without money we wouldn't function as a society and our lives would probably fall apart. How would we eat, sleep, or secure goods and services that we can't come up with on our own? Money is, in fact, a gift from God. It allows us to get food and enjoy the many other gifts God wants for us, like homes, hobbies, and health. But we also know from the Bible that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” We learn that “some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). So it would appear that there are two roads with money: the road of destruction and the road of God-pleasing use. God shows us the road of God-pleasing use is characterized by **Excellent Giving and Excellent Grace!**

1. Excel-lent Giving

In our lesson for today, Paul is describing the reaction the Macedonians had to an offering for the saints in Jerusalem. The believers in Jerusalem had a unique set of problems. The second they came to faith in Jesus, they were excluded from the Jewish community. The Jews who had put Jesus to death were not about to let his followers go about their business. So the believing Jews were ostracized from society and probably unable to make a solid living in Jerusalem. They couldn't feed their families and life was becoming more difficult by the day. Money was in short supply among those believers, so the rest of the Christians mobilized for an offering. Paul calls it a “service to the saints”. That's what every offering is. It's not us collecting money to pour into a black hole. It's God's people giving for God's service, wherever that might be.

Paul wrote about the Macedonians and the Corinthians, and their respective roles in this collection. The churches of Macedonia knew tough times and tight budgets. These churches were the ones Paul had founded and they're known to us as the Thessalonians, the Philippians, and the Bereans. Life was not easy for these Christians following their coming to faith in Christ either. Paul wrote here that they are enduring “the most severe trial” and “extreme poverty”. It was worse for them than living hand to mouth. They were literally beggars—that's how poor they were.

Yet, Paul lifted up the Macedonians as an example for the Corinthians and for us. Their joy was undiminished, despite their poverty. In fact, their poverty seemed to have focused their attention. (God has a way of removing distractions in life, whether we like it or not.) They focused on the task at hand and wanted to live for Christ with their resources. “For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their own ability.” The Macedonians didn't have much. But they gave. They gave to the collection, and their giving went beyond what they were even able to give and what Paul expected them to give. Their excitement over this collection was astounding: “Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.”

Who normally does the pleading when it comes to collections? Normally it's the leaders or the pastors or some outside agency looking for a contribution. But with this service to the saints in Jerusalem, the givers were the ones who were begging for the chance to help! The road to Jerusalem was paved with believers who wanted to give. Paul put the Corinthians on that same road—the road of **Excellent Giving**. Paul puts you and me on that same road—the road of **Excellent Giving**.

“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.” The road of **Excellent Giving means we excel at giving**. The Corinthians didn't lack in the gifts of the Spirit.

They had the trust in Jesus for forgiveness; they had gifts of speaking about the Word and knowledge of it; they had an eager desire to live lives of love.

From the moment I stepped into this congregation, I've been amazed at the gifts. We are just like the Corinthians. We have all the same gifts. We excel in our trust in Jesus for eternal life; we have gifted members who know the Word and can speak it; we have a zeal and love for God's work, wherever it might be. So, Paul tells us, “See that you also excel in this grace of giving.” Excellence—that's what God wants from us. From our love to our speech to our knowledge to our giving, God wants excellence.

But you and I have a problem. When we give or strive to excel at giving, we think we are loosing something. It's the way our sinful nature has programmed us to think. When we give an offering or a service to the LORD or our neighbor, we tend to see things in terms of what we no longer have. We can't take that vacation because we gave the Lord an extra offering at Christmas. I can't go to the Bucks game because I gave my neighbor money for groceries. We see the world in terms of “Me, Myself, and I”. In our world of “-ism”s (liberalism, conservatism, activism, Evangelicalism, consumerism) there's one “-ism” that poses the greatest threat to our giving heart. It's called “Me-ism”. “Me-ism” stands in the way of **Excellent Giving**. It blurs our vision and constantly puts road blocks in our path. God says, “Excel at Giving” and “Me-ism” says, “Do what feels good. Forget others! You've got enough problems without worrying about somebody else's!” “Me-ism” is a dead end. It has no hope and it only leads us away from God.

But notice how Paul started his description of the Macedonians: “We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonians.” In giving, we actually become the recipient of a gift from God. We benefit when we give to others. We don't loose anything. Jesus said, “It is better to give than to receive” because he knew that in giving, you actually do receive. What do you and I receive when we give? We receive the gift of looking outside ourselves. We know that Money is not our Master—Christ Jesus is our Master. And more than that, he's our Savior. And this is the road he has called us to walk.

Excel at Giving. Remember to give yourself first to the LORD and then everything else in your life will fall into place. “Seek first his kingdom!” But you might wonder, how can I excel at giving? Our bulletin insert has some helpful pointers and I'd ask that you take it out and look at it with me. There are four Guidelines for Giving, found on page

- † Priority – Make it a habit to set aside something for the Lord first before the bills come rolling in and you don't have anything left. God calls for first-fruits, not leftovers.
- † Personal – Make it a habit to commit a personal amount to the Lord. We don't publish giving records and I'm not going to dig through bank statements. This is between you and your God, just as the Macedonians acted “entirely on their own”.
- † Proportional – Based on your income, set aside a portion for the Lord. Don't play the comparison game with someone who's not in your situation, but don't become complacent. What you gave 10 years ago might be drastically different than what you gave last year because things change.
- † Then finally become Generous in your giving. We'll have an opportunity to go above and beyond today, as we take an offering for Haiti. People there are suffering and the need for our service grows with every aftershock!

2. Excel-lent Grace

But why is this road the one you and I want to travel? Why should we go down this road, when so many in our world walk the road of self-gratification? As godly givers, what's our motivation for giving in the first place?

“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.” There is a bigger grace that we experience in this life. It’s bigger and better than the grace of being part of an offering or a congregation. We experience the grace and love of Christ. His love for us is transformational. It takes us off the road of destruction and puts us into his eternal arms. The Lord Jesus did not consider the road to this earth a worthless excursion. He was rich, richer than we could possibly imagine, enjoying the perfect bliss of heaven. And yet, though he was rich, for our sakes, he became poor. He chose to be born in humility and die in obscurity. He suffered at the hands of men whom he had knit together in their mothers’ wombs. The Author of Life allowed himself to be put to death, for us. So that we through his poverty might become the richest people in the history of the world. We have eternal life and there is no treasure greater, no gift more amazing—this is **Excellent Grace!**

There once was a fire-fighter battling a forest fire. Because of thick smoke and flames he became separated from his partners. The fire grew more and more intense, and as he was assessing the situation he came upon the very campers who had accidentally started this fire. The fire fighter saw that the fire would soon overtake them. It meant certain death for all of them. But there was one possibility. Every fire fighter is equipped with a special foil fire-shield under which he could lie in just such a situation. But the fire fighter knew that both he and the campers could not all fit under the shield. So, he had the campers lie down and he covered them with it. Soon flames overtook the little group. They were saved, but the fire fighter died. He gave his own life to protect the very people who had started the blaze.

Jesus’ giving for us gives our lives meaning. When we see how he has sacrificed himself for us, we see that he wants us to sacrifice for others. “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” God’s nature is a nature of Giving. He gave his one and only Son for us. That same nature is now yours. You are a Giver. You are rich that is Excellent Grace because God excels at grace! The road to using our money in a God-pleasing way is not over. We have not completely conquered the temptations of Satan regarding money. But the battle for our souls is over. God has placed us on the path to heaven. Now he calls us to walk with him in our resources as well. Amen.

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