

Passing the peace

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

We find ourselves stepping back again, as the pandemic rages on. We take care for one another and do what it takes not to flaunt our perceived “rights” but to spare our neighbor, to extend thoughtfulness and actions towards others.

We have talked about how 2020 is going to be a year ripe for transformation - “don’t waste the pandemic” lean into the formation the Spirit is eager to work in our lives. Like many of you, I have tried to stay in what I think is a steady posture of evaluation and renewing of my mind in the word.

Some of this reflection upon the return from a brief vacation had me dreaming a bit about what we will all look like on the other end of 2020. When the politics will settle down. When the virus will be managed. When we move from protest to action in unity. And as I ponder these things, I wonder if what’s next is a refined, whole-hearted living.

We live half-hearted... we have difficulty committing to things because we want to keep our options open (even when there don’t seem to be other options!) We hold back our full self from others (what would they think?) We do enough to get by and hope we don’t make waves. We prefer living life like a wine tasting, sipping here and there rather than enjoying a full bottle.

But, when we come to Scripture and we submit ourselves to its authority as the word of God, we can’t help but notice all of it is geared toward whole-hearted existence. The full embrace of the hope proclaimed with all of who we are, our emotions, our intellect, our history, our struggle, our pain, our personality, our energy... This is what following Jesus is. A full surrender of ourselves to him.

That’s what Paul is reminding the Corinthians church in our text today, and I am convinced this is what Jesus is saying to you through his word.

Give yourself unreservedly to Jesus.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

I am super thankful for John and John preaching the last weeks. It's no joke to prepare then preach. A blessing we have people willing to step up for it.

Luckily for both of them that they didn't get a text on giving!

You must know that we are following the preaching calendar and this is not a special appeal for money for the church. The Lord has been very kind to us through your generosity this year. We have met and surpassed budgeted expectations. Keep giving, we won't waste it!

Here Paul is stirring the church back into whole-hearted living, accomplishing their commitment as it pertains to supporting believers abroad.

Not about tithing or regular giving... it's a one-time gift. But it is about God's grace as it relates to giving. It's about the motivation behind giving, and it is meant to be motivational for giving.

Paul, while in Jerusalem to advocate for full acceptance of Gentile believers, was exhorted to "remember the poor" and he was eager to do just that. Specifically the poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem. So on his missionary journeys he not only preached the gospel and established churches, he invited them into the support of the global body of Christ.

Having stayed with the relatively affluent church in Corinth for so long, he exhorted them to take a collection each week, to set it aside so that it could be used to provide for brothers and sisters far off. And they did it... but they became distracted.

Other voices, other ministers came into Corinth enticing the congregation away from Paul and the things he valued to extravagance more akin to the non-believing cultural expressions around them. And now, with the false teachers dealt with, he reminds the church of their commitment, he invites them back into whole-hearted generosity as a reflection of their faith.

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Paul recounts the model of Macedonia, makes an invitation back to eager generosity and rightly situates our motivation for it, and that is how we will progress this morning.

1) Model

When first reading this section of the letter we can wonder if Paul is pitting regional churches against each other to stir up competition - which I think would be totally fine since it is for a good cause - but that isn't what he is doing. He is recounting an example of faithfulness, adding to the hall of witnesses the church and believers can look to for a model of a life lived before Jesus.

It is also important to know that the story about the Macedonians is about believers, for believers, to instruct true believers.

He calls their generosity, their participation, a grace of God. The church of Philippi and Thessalonica among others had been faced with terrible affliction, real persecution, and their own poverty, yet they were eager, actually begging Paul to be able to give.

These were not churches of influence or large budgets. They were made up of what outcasts in their cities. Persecution means the loss of jobs and income for some. Yet there was an ache to give anyway.

I read a story of a British pastor who took to the pulpit and exhorted the church that they were giving too much! He knew the financial state of the congregation, and he thought they were being reckless in their giving so he encouraged them to dial it back for their own good. (I promise if giving gets out of hand I will do the same).

This is essentially what was coming from the Macedonian churches. Giving according to their means and beyond their means not because a goal was set, or command given but because they had become generous people.

And they did it because “they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.” They unreservedly gave themselves to Jesus and to the ministry among them. *Oh Lord, makes us Macedonian in this way!*

They were poor, “But such was their devotion to God, to the Lord Jesus, to Paul himself, and to the work of the gospel and of church unity, that they found it in their hearts to give not only according to their means but way beyond. This, Paul declares, can only be a work of grace.” Wright

They whole-heartedly surrendered to Jesus and his purpose. All is his. “When we know that our lives are not our own, neither will we think that our possessions are our own. It’s easy to surrender part when we’ve already given the whole.” Hughes

A young man I have been discipling recently asked about work and tithing. Wanting to know if he should add specific hours to be his tithe (these three hours are my tithe money). I encouraged him not to do that but see **all of his work** as for the Lord, as not to resent those hours but rejoice that he gets to give back what is not his to begin with.

And it is so important that this example of giving yourself to the Lord is paired with generosity. There is no way to grow to spiritual maturity without committing your finances to the Lord. Jesus can have our money and not have our hearts, but he cannot have our hearts without our money.

The surrender of self, without reservations to Jesus, becomes a gift of grace to the church; they are formed to be outwardly oriented, seeing the kingdom as a bigger family worth supporting.

What a great model. Surely it would have struck the Corinthians as they lived in relative comfort. And it was because of the reaction of Macedonia that Paul had Titus remind the church of their earlier eagerness to give. And he invites them to finish what they started.

2) Invitation

'You are a church that excels in everything - excel in this act of grace also.' Not as a submissive people commanded to give but as those with genuine love proven in their actions.

This call is not unlike James' calls to pair faith with works. Think of their faith as a monster truck with giant tires... and their generosity as the tracks left in the mud as the truck drives through.

Paul is inviting them back into the desire they had a year before, to joyfully give. This is the grace of giving. It is not dictated by ability. It has nothing to do with being well-off. It is willing. It views giving as a privilege.

They had made a commitment and now they were set to fulfill it. They don't have to give as to bankrupt themselves, but according to the provision God has given them. And it is something that comes back to serve them; "your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply their need."

In their readiness (willing generosity) it is an acceptable gift to the Lord. He is inviting them to undistracted generosity, on purpose.

We are invited to the same thing. To evaluate our finances so that they are submitted to Jesus, that our priorities align with his Kingdom. And then acting on the genuine love he stokes within us. Money is such a funny thing. In the church, we never want to talk about it because it is such a thing of status and frankly among the last areas of our lives we surrender.

If generosity is not our first response, maybe we have missed something... maybe we have built a wall to make us more comfortable when we come to Scripture like this... but whole-hearted Christianity penetrates here and you can rejoice when it does.

Like the Macedonian church, all believers are invited into the grace of generosity. Into giving first yourselves to the Lord and to his church.

But Paul knows that an appeal based on a faithful example shouldn't on its own be motivation for generosity. He knows that the benefit of it, the good of giving, isn't even reason enough to give. He wants our unreserved, undistracted generosity to be motivated in one place alone. The gospel of Jesus.

3) Motivation

This is the deeper motivation we need. "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 by his poverty might become rich." (9)

This is not the motivation for generosity alone, it is the motivation for all of life.

That we were lost in our poverty of sin, or disregarding God and rejecting his way. Yet he came to take on our poverty, to carry a burden we could never fully lift. That Jesus would take on a death we deserve pouring out the riches of his blood on the cross so that we could experience the forgiveness of sin and righteousness. To be made clean, rich before God.

Honestly, if your generosity is motivated by anything else, what a waste. Where some see giving as bargaining with God (if I give I will get this) or a way to appease God in some way (he won't be mad at me if I give 11% of my income...) The word says that Jesus paid the ransom, he met the wrath against sin, he won God's pleasure in you by his work.

And because that is true you can first give yourself to him, whole-heartedly, and with generosity. Committed self-giving to the Lord and to others is basic to Christianity. Because of the finished work of Jesus!

"Jesus didn't just tithe, he gave all of his riches - his total self-giving act is the only thing that can move us to give beyond the minimum... If we don't desire to respond to God's grace with sacrificial giving, then we have not yet fully understood the nature of the gospel. The answer to our motivation problem is not adherence to a new command but a more thoroughgoing knowledge and experience of the extravagant self-giving of Christ!"

And listen - that hits me that same way it is hitting you. Paul believes the quantity of their giving will match the quality of their changed hearts. And so it is with us, and if we aren't there yet, we can submit ourselves to the transformation the Spirit is promised to give.

The gospel loosens the grip of things on our hearts and makes us generous.

Philippians 2:6–8 Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (ESV)

Hear that. Given for you. Becoming poor to free you. Now exalted above every other name. “Jesus, with all the ‘riches’ of his life in the glorious mystery of God’s inner being, became ‘poor’, both in the sense that becoming human was an astonishingly humbling thing and in the sense that the human life he took on was not royal, rich and splendid in the world’s terms but instead poor, humble and eventually shameful. Paul has modeled his entire life and work on this Jesus, and he longs, throughout this letter, that the Corinthians will do so as well.” Wright

That we will do so as well!

“The charis, the grace of God towards them and also dynamically at work in them, will create charismata, gifts, within them, including the gift of giving... Where members of a congregation are expressing the grace of God displayed towards them by a gracious exercising of gifts for others, there we see a church which can truly be called “charismatic.”

Let the gospel invade every inch of your life. Let the grace of Jesus make you generous. That your love would be proven genuine.

And he will always provide... just like the sojourners in the wilderness. As people with no lack we live for the glory of Christ.

Give yourself unreservedly to Jesus.

Start with Jesus. Meet him. Know him. His generosity toward you. His grace for you. His faithfulness

“When Jesus, for the sake of us all, became poor, we became rich; now, when people who follow him are ready to put their resources at his disposal, the world and the church may benefit, not only from the actual money but from the fact that when the Jesus-pattern of dying and rising, of riches to-poverty-to-riches, is acted out, the power of the gospel is let loose afresh in the world, and the results will be incalculable.” Wright

Give yourself to Jesus, first, all of you. He will make you generous, he will bring you in as a participant in the grace of God at work in the world right now.

In a world of half-hearted living it is the examples of whole-hearted devotion that stir and spur us on, motivated by the generosity of Jesus to give ourselves to him for others.

This week we lost giants of whole-heartedness that showed us that giving yourself unreservedly to Jesus might look different from others but it would still smell of our Savior.

John Lewis anchored his life on human equality before God and he didn't convince with his arguments, he convinced you by his life. Facing violence - a cracked skull, he remained steadfast to his calling to speak for and seek justice. His biographer, Jon Meacham says of Lewis: *“He was full of hope at the end. Remember: His vision of the world was theological more than political — he was a preacher from his teen years —and redemption was forever possible if enough of us would follow the commandment to love one another as we love ourselves.”*

Whole-hearted devotion.

And J.I. Packer, whose skull was damaged after being hit by a van as a child, devoted his life to knowing God and making him known, from the gift of a typewriter he would go on to author some of the most meaningful pieces of theological work for a generation.

“In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge [justification] is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father [adoption] is a greater.” Being God’s child is the thought “that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life...” It led him to a whole-hearted life lived unreservedly for the glory of Christ.

Generosity in all things because Jesus has become THE thing.

We want you to know brothers and sisters about the grace of God that has been given among his people... that we too would give ourselves unreservedly to Jesus. May it be so.