

Sunday, July 1, 2018 – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
“Grace to Share”

2 Corinthians 8: 1-9; 13-15

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Adapted from CJ 2015

Story Applied

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Oh no, you think – pastor, you just talked about money a couple months ago in a sermon, and now here you are again – bad timing, too, likely our lowest attendance week of the year, what with the Fourth of July coming this week and all – what are you thinking?

Well truth be told this isn't really about money, although money comes up in our text today... it's all about grace. We see in action what grace looks like in the lives of everyday people.

I'm going to describe a congregation for you. It's one from about twenty-five years after Jesus rose from the dead. The people lived in poverty. Civil wars had decimated the country. Then the Romans came and finished the job. There were high taxes and only a few good jobs. Most people had very little to live on. Add to that, persecution. The small congregation was not welcome in the town, and the members may have been unemployed, ostracized, and even beaten.

Now this church would seem to be a prime candidate for another congregation's help, for someone to show them generosity in their great need. And you would be wrong. Paul had started congregations in Macedonia—we know them as the Philippians and Thessalonians—and even Paul didn't expect them to give generously. He knew the tough conditions they lived in. But when Paul got up a collection for the church in Jerusalem, which was living under even worse conditions, these Macedonian churches gave willingly. They gave more than they could afford. They gave joyfully. They gave generously. They gave to fellow believers they had never met and probably would never see. Paul called this gift of money an act of grace. These churches excelled at generosity.

I'm reminded of a lady at my former congregation, where we had a food bank. She herself was in great need but took it upon herself to seek out others who had needs. She must have driven to the homes of 12 to 15 different church members who couldn't make it to the food bank to deliver to others in greater need than herself.

Now I'm going to tell you of another congregation. This one too is from the early years of the church. It was in a good location. Some of the members had money and were well known in the community. Some were knowledgeable and gifted speakers. This congregation had started a collection for the church in Jerusalem nearly a year earlier. They had a plan. They set aside money every week so that they would meet their goal when Paul sent a young pastor and protégé, Titus, to collect it.

Now this sounds just like a place with members who would be generous and giving, doesn't it? Well, once again you would be wrong. This congregation, the Corinthians, needed some encouragement from Paul. It's the text we're talking about right now in chapter 8. It seems they had fallen behind in the collection. They had slacked off. The giving became irregular and then petered out. Do you catch the irony? The poverty-stricken congregations gave generously, more than they could; the richer congregation failed in this act of grace; they slacked off.

I don't believe I need to do much to apply this to today's church life, whether we're talking about financial resources, volunteering, looking after the sick.... too many Christian organizations and congregations struggle with unmet commitments, budget shortfalls, and lack of support. I'll summarize it this way: If you're not giving something away generously each week, something has gone awry each week.

So Paul challenges the Corinthians, and by extension, us, to excel at generosity. He gives them the Macedonians as an example to emulate. Paul wants the excellence in generosity shown by some churches to be a guiding model for others. Give joyfully. Give more than you can. Give as an act of grace, not because you feel forced to. Give because it has become second nature to you. Excel in generosity.

To excel at something means you have a reason to practice, to give yourself to the task, and to study. Paul gives the Corinthians that reason: Jesus. Jesus is rich. Incredibly rich. All of the heavenly glories are his. He is God himself, eternally worthy of all praise and honor. Yet, he became poor for us. On that first Christmas, he humbled himself and became one of us. He lowered himself to be born. He left no doubt he had come in poverty—a barn, a royal line yet a poor family, visiting shepherds instead of a palace guard. He became obedient under the law for

one purpose: to make us rich. He became obedient even to death on a cross to give us the riches of being forgiven and restored to God's family.

Jesus's act of grace on the cross is the reason for us to excel in generosity. We are so rich in Jesus that generosity should be second nature to us. Just as he supplied what we could not, now he calls us to supply what other believers cannot. Here's another story that moved me to study, practice, and get better at excelling in generosity.

I love the mindset – do we start from a perspective of poverty, to look at what we lack, the blessings we need from God, or are we thankful for the grace already given us to share generously from the plenty we have – especially that rock solid plenty of forgiveness and salvation already won for us? You saw that given to the Johansson family this morning in baptism.

What a wonderful example of what it means to give each day so that you can give generously. Paul urged the Corinthians to excel at generosity. He encourages you and me to do that as well. In Jesus' name, Amen.