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Proper 8 • 2 Corinthians 8:1–9; 13–15 • June 28, 2015

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Paul urges the Corinthians to finish up their part of the collection for the church in Jerusalem. They started a year earlier, setting aside an amount each week. But it seems the giving had slowed down such that it would not be ready in time for Titus to receive it. But notice Paul doesn't use the accusing law to beat them down. Rather, he uses a variety of motivations for them to finish up the collection. Hence, the law in this sermon is not a long accusation of poor giving, but it moves toward an encouragement to excel in generosity.

Even though money is not mentioned, it's what Paul is referring to as an "act of grace." The text is not primarily a set of principles for stewardship in general, which includes time and talents, although it could serve in that way; rather, Paul urges giving money generously to help the saints in the church. Note also he refers to the church in Jerusalem as saints, not the poor.

Lutheran theology rightly emphasizes the gospel as motivation for giving. While most commentaries will claim Paul is holding up Jesus as the example par excellence for generosity in vv. 8–9 (which is law—doing what Jesus did), the sermon below

proclaims Jesus becoming poor for us as gospel which then calls us to give generously. However, Paul does not restrict his motivation for giving to the gospel. When you look at what Paul says, you find he uses a variety of reasons for the Corinthians to give: appealing to their competitiveness by comparing them to the Macedonian church, pushing them to excel like they have with other gifts, warning them not to lose face by not finishing the collection, and calling them to be as earnest as he has boasted about them to others. In the sermon, besides the gospel motivation, appeals are made to the positive examples of other believers, and the call is to excel in generosity.

Excel in Generosity

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 inserted a story here about a woman who needed food for her family. But when offered food by an Episcopalian rector at Christmastime, she led him to another family in more need. That woman, like the Macedonian believers, excelled at generosity. See <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2004/december/15668.html>.)

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 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 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. 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 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 too. Give because it has become second nature to you. Excel in generosity.

(I had prepared a poster board with an outline of a cross. "Reason!" was written in the center as that word would lead into the gospel proclamation.) Now, I'm going to ask you a question and ask for some answers. What does someone need to do to become a really good pianist? What does it take to excel at playing the piano? (I wrote their answers—a good teacher, practice, goals, a love for music, study, devotion to the task, talent—on the cross around the word "Reason!").

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 (YouTube: Handful of Rice—Mizoram, India). 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 to do that as well. (Adapted from a sermon preached in December 2014.)

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