

Nov. 21-22, 2015

2 Corinthians 8:1–12

**8** “And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. <sup>2</sup> Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. <sup>3</sup> For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup> they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. <sup>5</sup> And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will. <sup>6</sup> So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. <sup>7</sup> But 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. <sup>8</sup> I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. <sup>10</sup> And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. <sup>11</sup> Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. <sup>12</sup> For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. “

About four months ago, 389 voting delegates attended the 63rd WELS Biennial Convention. From opening worship through the closing service, the participants were vividly reminded that God reconciled himself to sinners through the perfect life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection of his Son, Jesus. In addition, the attendees heard how this merciful Savior through the Holy Spirit has led multitudes of souls to trust his forgiveness and to serve him and others in thankful love. Great are the works of the Lord. Alleluia!

In Christ alone, we are one with God and each other; and we are one in purpose. This, too, the delegates experienced as they received updates from our ministry leaders, heard eye-witness testimonies from a number of our missionaries, and reached decisions regarding the work we perform together for Jesus. We join with all the members of our church body in thanking God for our many blessings and the work we are privileged to do for him!

But how can we work together to financially support our local and regional gospel endeavors as well as the sharing of Christ in North America and around the globe so that WELS ministries have the resources they need for their work? It all starts with the right attitude. Today’s text reminds us: ***God Enables Us to Excel in the Grace of Giving Motivated by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ***

“<sup>9</sup> 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. “

When the apostle encourages Christians to “excel in the grace of giving,” he isn’t urging us to compete with others for the top spot. The word translated “excel” literally means to “overflow,” like a spring that constantly provides water. In addition, “the grace of giving” that God gives his people describes not the amount of our gifts but our attitude towards giving.

Overflowing in the grace of giving isn’t something that comes naturally. By nature we hated God and loved things; we were selfish and stingy, greedy and envious, and we thought that we could, “Take life easy; eat, drink, and be merry.” How lost we were! We had no idea that we were like the rich fool of Jesus’ parable who treasured earthly things and was not rich towards God.

Even as Christians we daily fight our Old Adam’s faulty motives for giving, like pride, self-righteousness, guilt, pressure from others, or going through the motions. We don’t always have the right attitude towards our offerings. That’s why we need God’s grace of giving so our offerings are prompted by the undeserved love of our Lord Jesus Christ, who became poor though he was rich.

As King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus always lived in a continual state of limited less wealth. Everything belongs to him. But he lovingly chose to humble himself and live as a man who as Jesus himself said, was poorer than the birds of the air who had nests and the foxes who had holes. He willingly allowed himself to be despised and rejected by men, to be mocked, beaten, whipped, and crucified, to pay the guilt of our sins. What a sacrifice the Lord made for all sinners – us, too – giving up a wealth that knew no bounds for total impoverishment!

In turn, what a gracious gift Jesus gave all sinners – including us – by impoverishing himself! He gave us wealth that has no bounds – free forgiveness for all our sins; peace with God; instant help whenever we call on him; a living hope into an inheritance that can’t perish, spoil, or fade; and a glorious, eternal home in heaven. What self-sacrificing love!

This grace of our Lord Jesus Christ kindles in us a selfless love for our Savior and others, which we express in all that we say and do, including our offerings. When we remember how Jesus washed away our sins in baptism, and when we receive forgiveness by absolution and through Christ’s body and blood in Holy Communion, the grace of the Lord Jesus expands its influence in our hearts and lives. In addition, our living Good Shepherd makes sure that “our cup overflows” so that we have all that we need for our earthly life and his kingdom work.

A well-known philanthropist was asked, “How is it that you give away so much, and yet have so much left?” “I suppose it’s like this,” he replied. “God shovels in and I shovel out, and he has a bigger shovel than I do!”

**God Enables Us to Excel in the Grace of Giving as we are encouraged by the example of our fellow believers (1-5).**

“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the

saints. 5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will."

Consider the churches in Macedonia and how God enabled them to excel in the grace of giving: the most severe trial (persecution) and extreme poverty combined with overflowing joy (in Jesus who rescued them from their sins) resulted in rich generosity. They couldn't help but give because of the grace God had given them.

This reminds us: generous givers aren't born; they're reborn. God's undeserved love that saves the sinner inspires a new life of service including unselfish, generous giving. The Macedonians gave as much as they were able. They decided entirely on their own to participate in the offering for famine-stricken believers in Judea and they pleaded to share in this service to the saints. They gave themselves first to the Lord and offered their lives as living sacrifices.

They weren't the first to do so. Consider from our first lesson today King David, the Israelite leaders, and the people, who willingly and generously brought gifts to the LORD for his temple. In today's money David's gift of gold is valued at more than 600 million. In Jesus' ministry there was the woman who poured perfume on Jesus's head – worth a year's wages, Zacchaeus' gift of half his possessions to the poor, and the widow who gave everything she had to live on. The Christians in Corinth also serve as examples, since they were the first to participate in the special offering for the saints in Jerusalem. Lord, enable us to catch and model their spirit!

We also have such examples today: generous parents who taught us first fruits giving, children who suggest we help those in need, the women of the LWMS who generously support missions, families who make giving to the Lord a matter of first priority.

I've been encouraged by such people when dealing with my own innate selfishness and when responding to critics of Christian stewardship encouragement. Do you receive criticism for your generosity? Do you struggle with ingratitude, complaining, and worry? If so, take courage from the example of your fellow believers. As Jesus helped them, so he will enable us to express our thankfulness!

**God Enables Us to Excel in the Grace of Giving expressing the thankfulness of our own hearts (6-8,10-12)**

"So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 But 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. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. 11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. 12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. "

What Paul was inspired to encourage is already happening! Since January, 2015, God's people in our church body have given \$500,000+ to WELS Christian Aid and Relief for flood relief in Malawi, earthquake assistance in Nepal, and other aid initiatives. In addition, the congregations of our synod have offered Jesus in the last year nearly 30 million for soul relief through the message of God's grace

we share in our various ministries. Then there are the many donations that support our local, regional, and special church body initiatives. God be praised for the ways he's enabled us to express the thankfulness of our own hearts!

In addition to this regular, ongoing support, the members of our church body are being asked to consider special gifts to retire our synod's capital debt of \$4.7 million by the end of June, 2016 – two years ahead of schedule. With God's gracious blessing, we've been able to reduce our capital debt by \$18 million the past seven years. If our Lord enables us to retire the remaining debt by next July 2016, we'll be able to use the annual 1.6 million debt payment to move forward in ministry – maintaining the endeavors we've already begun and, possibly, supporting new opportunities. What endeavors will we be able to maintain and possibly expand?

Our offerings support World Mission work in 23 fields to 128,000+ souls (e.g., among South Sudanese in Ethiopia, teaching English to souls in Russia, training Bible teachers in Nepal, training pastors in China). In Home Missions, our generous gifts help 160 congregations in North America (e.g., Minot, ND and Vancouver, BC), campus ministries, and outreach to Mormons, Muslims, and the Hmong. Our faith-prompted financial gifts are training 800 future gospel ambassadors this year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Martin Luther College. God will use this year's graduates to harvest souls throughout the world. Then, we help support marriage retreats, worship conferences, youth rallies, a Spanish-language website, a series of outreach movies, and gospel-based service to 80,000+ prisoners. It's the largest prison ministry in the US. To God be the glory for these endeavors, and the generous gifts that support them!

In this age of materialism, it's wonderful to hear that God gives us the "eager willingness" and the "means to complete" our offerings, and that "the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have." Therefore, we give to the Lord cheerfully, trustingly, joyfully, and gratefully, knowing that our Savior prompts our offerings and receives and uses them for his kingdom purposes. What a difference that makes!

When I was growing up, I remember regularly singing a prayer to the Lord as the offering was brought to the altar. While that prayer isn't used quite as frequently today,, its message is still fixed in my mind and heart, and it expresses well the truth of our text: "We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone a trust, O Lord, from thee. May we thy bounties thus as stewards true receive, and gladly, as thou blessest us, to thee our first fruits give." Thank you, Lord Jesus, for enabling us to overflow in the grace of giving. May your kingdom come and your will be done in and through us! Amen.