

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine” (2 Corinthians 8:8).

I would like to describe two Christian congregations to you.

The first congregation lived in poverty. They paid high taxes and had only few jobs. Most in this congregation had very little to live on. On top of that, this congregation experienced extreme persecution. This congregation was not welcomed in its own city, as their members experienced unemployment, exclusion, and physical beatings for their faith.

This congregation would appear to be a prime candidate for another congregation’s help. But there, you’d be wrong. Despite poverty, exclusion from society, and beatings, this congregation gave generously. This congregation gave more than they could afford. They gave joyfully. They gave generously. They gave to fellow Christians they had never met and likely would never see.

Now, I’d like to describe to you another congregation. This congregation had members who had financial resources and were well known in the community. This congregation began a collection for another congregation in need about a year earlier. This congregation had a plan. They set aside money every week so that they would meet their financial goal to assist their sister congregation.

This second congregation sounds like a place that would have members who would be generous. But there, you’d be wrong. This congregation had fallen behind in their collection. They had slacked off. Their giving became irregular and then petered out.

The poverty-stricken congregation gave generously, more than they could. The wealthier congregation failed in this act of grace; they slacked off.

Both of these congregations were very real. That first congregation is simply called “the Macedonians.” Since there is no “Epistle to the Macedonians,” *who are they?* Believe me, you have heard of them.

The Macedonian congregations were located in Philippi and Thessalonica. St. Paul wrote of their faith and example in his epistles. The second congregation is the Church in Corinth.

Today, on this Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, St. Paul encourages the Corinthian Church toward generosity. So, in his plea for generosity, Paul is holding up the Philippians and Thessalonians as examples to the Corinthians.

Again, these churches in Macedonia were not wealthy. Yet, from the depths of their poverty, they overflowed in an abundance of generosity toward others in need. Plus, these Macedonian congregations were adamant about generosity. They begged Paul so that they could participate in the grace and fellowship of helping others in need.

Meanwhile, the Corinthian Church, which was financially well by earthly standards needed to be persuaded to assist their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who were in need. Now, Paul is very careful about this. Paul isn't commanding and demanding the Corinthians to give. Rather, Paul is flattering the Corinthians as he says that they excel in many things and that they should also excel in generosity. So, using the Macedonian congregations as an example, St. Paul is attempting to persuade the Corinthians toward generosity.

Generosity and stinginess – or “*tightfistedness*” – are not determined by how much wealth a person has. Generosity is a matter of the heart, a matter of trust, a matter of faith. So, St. Paul seeks to open the hearts of the Corinthians to trust in God more than in their earthly wealth, to trust in their Lord more than what's in their bank accounts.

Congregations like the Macedonians and the Corinthians also exist today.

Some are like the Macedonians. They want to give. They want to help. They can't be held back from generosity. Other congregations are stingy. They are selfish. They can't be persuaded toward generosity despite being abundantly wealthy.

But these aren't the only types of congregations. There are also congregations that exist in the middle. They wish they could increase giving, but when the opportunity comes to increase giving, their minds turn to something else – a home remodel, a new car, or a dream vacation.

Now, there is nothing sinful with remodeling a home, a new car, or a dream vacation, but more often than we may be willing to admit, these things that serve our own desires are quicker to reach our minds and hearts than the needs of others. Sin has us curved in upon ourselves. Sin leads us to give our scraps, rather than our first fruits to the church. This had happened to the Corinthian church, and St. Paul was encouraging them to bend away from their own self-interests and toward God and their neighbor.

Today, too many congregations struggle with unmet commitments, budget shortfalls, and lack of financial support. To this, St. Paul would say, *“If you’re not giving generously each week, something has gone awry.”*

Now, bending away from our own self-interests is not a painless endeavor. It requires sacrifice. It requires denying oneself.

Generous givers are not born that way. Generous giving is an attitude of being “reborn.” It is the salvation in Christ that inspires the sinner to a new life of service that includes unselfish, generous giving.

The Macedonians were not pressured into giving. It was out of ***“their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty [that they] overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part”*** (2 Corinthians 8:2). They begged Paul to take part (2 Corinthians 8:4).

The Macedonians considered it a privilege, a gift of God’s grace, that they could be part of this offering. They saw this sharing of generosity as Christian fellowship. They saw this giving as a display of Christian unity. These Macedonian Christians were expressing their fellowship, their unity in Christ, with their brothers and sisters in Christ through this offering.

For Paul, these Macedonians served as a great example and model for the Corinthian Church. However, Paul’s emphasis is not on the amount of giving, but on their attitude, an attitude that looks up on giving as a *privilege*, an attitude that says, *“I give myself, and that includes my offerings, as a thank offering to my Lord who gave Himself first for me.”* That, St. Paul says, is an example worth emulating.

So, what should we do here at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church? Should we post financial giving statements on a church bulletin board to encourage each other to give more? No! That is not an example of generous giving. That only serves to puff up some and hurt others.

Thanks be to God that we have both an example to follow and a Redeemer to save us from our sins of selfishness and stinginess: Jesus Christ. ***“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”*** (2 Corinthians 8:9). Just think about that!

Jesus left the riches and glories of heaven to come down to earth. Jesus emptied Himself and took on our human form. And He didn't live in any royal palace here on earth. He didn't overthrow Rome so that He could take Caesar's palace. No, Jesus had no place to lay His head. He wandered from town to town relying on the generosity of others.

And that wasn't enough. He was arrested, beaten, mocked, and sentenced to death. He could have stopped it all. He had the power to stop it, but Jesus went to the cross stripped and bleeding to die a criminal's death. A death that He did not deserve. But by Jesus' poverty, we are made rich. By His wounds, we are healed. By His shed blood, we have peace. By His atoning death, we are given life everlasting.

From the depth of His poverty, His crucifixion on a cross surrounded by criminals, Jesus purchases and wins us from all sins, from eternal death, and from the power of the devil. Not with silver or gold, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.

Now, we are His. As forgiven and redeemed, we continually live under Him in His kingdom, serving Him in the everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness that He alone has given to us. So, like the Church in Corinth, you may have been less generous in the past. But the past is the past. In Christ, all sins are forgiven. And in Christ, we have the example of a generous attitude, who in His poverty, He has made you rich!

Jesus' act of grace on the cross is the reason we ought to excel in generosity. Generosity ought to become second nature to us. Financial generosity should be seen like forgiveness. We give and we forgive, because Christ first gave of Himself everything for us! Generous giving in an act of faith knowing that the Triune God is the Giver who always provides our needs of body and soul! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +