

“JOY AND DEEP POVERTY ABOUND IN RICH LIBERALITY”

Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. (2 Corinthians 8:1-2 NKJV)

This chapter is about stewardship. When I was a pastor, I dreaded stewardship season. It brought out the worst in many members.

1.) Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God. So we urged Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also complete this grace in you as well. (2 Corinthians 8:1-6 NKJV)

Paul begins this chapter on stewardship by giving the example of the generosity of the Macedonian churches. Macedonia was a very impoverished area. Corinthians probably looked down on Macedonians much like middle class Americans regard poor people.

When I was still young in the faith, I began to hear and learn about tithing. Intellectually, I agreed that tithing was what the Bible taught, but I couldn't see how poor people could possibly give ten percent of the little bit of money they earned. What finally convinced me was an example. I had a friend who worked for a jewelry store. He sold and repaired watches and jewelry. He made good money and he tithed. He was married and had three children when God called him into the ministry. He went to Seminary and had a low-paying job. Someone said, "Ralph, you are in Seminary and sacrificing for God. He doesn't expect you to be tithing now." Ralph said, "I took his advice for about a month. I seemed to have less money than when I was tithing. I lost all the joy I had before from giving to God's work. I resumed tithing" That convinced me. I became a tither also.

2.} But as you abound in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us--see that you abound in this grace also. I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. And in this I give advice: It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have. (2 Corinthians 8:7-12 NKJV)

Having given the example of the Macedonian churches – how joyful and generous they had been in giving to the relief of the Christians in Jerusalem despite their own great trials of affliction and deep poverty – Paul now turns the attention on the Corinthians themselves. They had been the first to suggest that such an offering be taken. Now that it was time to send the funds, the Corinthian church was lagging behind in collecting money for famine relief. The diligence of the Macedonians in giving charity brings the sincerity of the love of the Corinthians into question.

Paul points to the gift of the Lord Jesus. He was rich, but He left the splendor of heaven and became poor. Through His poverty, the Corinthians have become rich. They have a place prepared for them in heaven and an inheritance that is kept securely for them. Even in this life, their new life in Christ has enriched them.

The Corinthians had abundance in speech, knowledge, diligence, and their love for Paul. He asked them now to be bountiful in their giving. Paul points the spotlight on the reason they have not fulfilled their initial promises of aid. The will and desire to give is a grace which we receive from the Holy Spirit. In the next chapter he writes: So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7 NKJV)

3.) For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; but by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack--that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack." But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of Titus. For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he went to you of his own accord. And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches, (2 Corinthians 8:13-18 NKJV)

If you talk to many Americans you will find that they are resentful of welfare, food stamps, government funded medical care, free breakfast and lunch in the schools. You will hear them express the opinion that they support themselves and their family without government assistance because they work hard and spend wisely. In other words, they deserve to be comfortable, they've earned it. Other people who don't work as hard, don't deserve to be warm, well-fed, and healthy. But the Christian should have a different perspective.

For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Corinthians 4:7 NKJV)

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, (Acts 2:44-46 NKJV)

Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common... Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, (Acts 4:32,34 NKJV)

"That there may be equality." That may sound like socialism, but it is love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Right now there are thousands of Christians among the refugees. We should never forget the reason God gives us wealth--so we can share it with those in need.

God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. (2 Corinthians 9:8 NKJV)

4.) And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches, and not only that, but who was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind, avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us-- providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. And we have sent with them our brother whom we have often proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, because of the great confidence which we have in you. If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Therefore show to them, and before the churches the proof of your love and of our boasting on your behalf. (2 Corinthians 8:18-24 NKJV)

Even in the early church the issue of financial integrity was an important issue. There are references to people who sold land and houses and brought the money to be used by the church. In a previous sermon I told about a man who used and lost the endowments of a seminary and denomination in a Ponzi scheme. Almost every where I have pastored I have heard about preachers or church treasurers who pilfered money from the coffers of the church.

Paul devotes the last one-fourth of this chapter to tell the precautions that were being taken to insure that every bit of the money collected in the various churches for relief of Christians suffering from famine in Jerusalem would reach them. They would also assure that the money delivered was used as it was intended.

I receive dozens of pieces of mail every week asking for contributions for hungry children, for wounded soldiers, for homeless teens, for victims of natural disasters, for various diseases. I have learned that many of the charities have high paid executives. You have to research organizations before you send God's money to them

Paul is teaching us this lesson by detailing the precautions he took in sending the relief funds to Jerusalem.