

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost; November 10, 2024

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

“Let Your Wealth Show”

Now brothers, we want you to know about the grace of God that was given the churches of Macedonia: In a severe test of trouble, their overflowing joy and their deep poverty overflowed into an abundance of their generosity. I testify that of their own free will they gave according to their ability, and even beyond their ability, pleading with us with an urgent request for the gracious privilege of joining in this service to the saints. And they did this not as we had expected, but in keeping with God’s will they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us. As a result we urged Titus, since he had already made a beginning, to bring to completion this gracious gift on your part. But just as you overflow in every way – in faith, in word, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us – so that you also overflow in this gracious gift.

I do not say this as a command, but to test how genuine your love is, by comparing it with the eagerness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.

It was a fascinating conversation. I was waiting on two gentlemen, and gathered through eavesdropping that one of them was a developer for Marquette University. The other was apparently an alumnus of considerable means. As the developer laid out the many projects and programs that needed support, he worked in all kinds of little psychological tweaks to try to get the largest possible stake of the alumnus’ estate. He even used this one: “Besides,” he said, “you will want to be careful about leaving too much to your children.” And then he explained: a too large inheritance can endanger work ethic. Dropping too much money into a young person’s lap can ruin their opportunity to make it on their own and look back with a feeling of accomplishment at their own life.

I don’t know if that of argument worked for the coffers of Marquette University. But would you buy it? Do you agree that too much of an inheritance can ruin work ethic and the chance for children to make it on their own? If you found yourself in the blessed position of even having to consider such an issue, would you be careful about leaving too much to a child?

There is good reason for the Holy Spirit to describe what we receive from God as an inheritance. An inheritance is not earned; it is a gift freely given by someone who loves to the one they love. It’s the choice and the work of the one who gives it. It’s not only an accurate picture for all the good things God gives us, but it’s a most comforting one, too. Especially when it comes to the best part of our inheritance.

In his Son Jesus, God gives us an inheritance that makes us marvelously wealthy. “Rich,” is the word St. Paul uses as he writes to the Christians of Corinth, and he uses it to describe them. Corinth was a prosperous city, and probably some of these Christians had a good amount of gold set aside. That kind of richness comes from God, too, but it’s not the kind Paul has in mind here. This is the treasure of heaven, stored up and waiting for them – and us – and waiting for us. It is the wealth of being clothed in the bright white perfection that is required to enter God’s glory and to feast with him as we live in mansions and joyfully work in the eternal temple – the kind of work you do because you want to, not because you’ve got to pay bills.

And this wealth is more than waiting for us in heaven. It's wealth we enjoy now. There is no better richness than certainty and peace of mind. And we have it. We live now knowing God loves us as his children, children he will not punish eternally for any of their sins. We get to live now knowing that when he does take our souls to enjoy the treasure of heaven, he will not forget our bodies, but as he raised his Son's on Easter Day he will raise ours too, on the Last Day.

We are so very, very rich! And it's all given to us by God, in the unearned gift of an inheritance. The Holy Spirit likes to call this "grace," undeserved love. The Corinthians knew God's grace, and so do we: his heart of pure, undeserved love that freely gives such a wildly rich inheritance.

It is free to us, but it was not free to his Son. Jesus did the work and paid the price to make this wealth ours. And if the receiver of an inheritance is not to become lazy and corrupted, this is what he needs to remember: you didn't earn that inheritance, but someone did! And not just someone! The one who loves you and gives it to you earned it for you! Remember what it cost him to leave this wealth to you! **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich.**

Jesus put in the work to make us rich. He became poor to give us eternal treasure. To say he was rich and became poor is a divine understatement. Jesus was more than rich. He is the eternal Son of God, glorified in the eternal splendor of heaven's glory. And he exchanged that heavenly splendor for flesh like yours and mine. He hid his divinity behind our frail skin and bones. And even more than that, he traded heaven's glory not for a mansion and piles of gold, but for a manger and a meager survival. And he traded the service of angels not to be served on earth, but to perform the most drastic act of service.

You see, his poverty was much greater than just plain clothes and unassuming food. Way more than that! He gave up his life to take our sins away and make that robe of righteousness ours. He suffered through hell in our place on the cross to make the treasure of heaven ours. He was not just left without possessions on the cross, but without the presence of his Father. That was the real depth of his poverty, the poverty we deserved to suffer forever: separation from God.

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was rich and became poor for you, so that you now are rich. Whether you have a billion dollars or negative dollars, you have the wealth of heaven, and you get to live as God's dearly loved child until you reach it. That is your inheritance, your wealth earned by the poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, from the gracious heart of God.

This most beautiful Bible passage is a closing argument of sorts. Paul reminds the Corinthians of God's gracious gift of wealth in Jesus Christ as a reason – *the* reason, really – that they should be generous with the worldly wealth God has given them. Think of it like this: since you have the treasure of heaven in Jesus' work, it stops mattering so much how much wealth God gives you in this world. It starts mattering much more how you're going to use it: to thank God for the wealth of heaven. You'll use what he gives you here to thank him for what he's given you.

"With your money" is, of course, just one of many ways to thank God. **But just as you overflow in every way – in faith, in word, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us – see that you also overflow in this gracious gift.** Anything and everything done to God's glory, in accord with his will, says, "Thank you, God, for all the wealth you've given me." It's true there are many ways to do it, and true that money is only one. But it is one! And it's a big one.

It's not, however, the one we like to hear about. I listened to sermons for many years from a pastor who rarely spoke about money. Hardly ever. Way less than he should have, probably. After a rare stewardship message, the man behind me in the line for coffee said to his wife, "All that guy talks about is money." He didn't want to hear it at all, clearly. And why don't we want to hear it, usually? Does our sensitivity on the topic betray a little guilt?

At the moment I write this, I feel like I am preaching to the choir. Trinity is, on the whole, the most financially generous congregation not only that I have served, but frankly that I have ever heard or dreamed of. But there is an old saying: the choir that is not preached to will not be the choir for long. And maybe when you listen carefully to the Spirit's guidance on this way of using your money, you might agree you're not quite perfect in how you give to your church.

Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to give to the church for the specific reason of helping widows who were suffering during a famine. We give to church to help people, too. We help through charities and other forms of assistance, but the biggest help we give people – and the main the mission of the church – is to help people by proclaiming the gracious gift of our Lord Jesus Christ: the wealth of heaven.

God wants us to give joyfully to our church. Paul was informing the Corinthians about the exemplary giving of other Christians. He calls their joy **overflowing**. Does joy come spilling out of your heart when the plate comes past? He also says they gave **according to their ability, and even beyond their ability**. When's the last time you compared your offerings to your wages, to gauge your ability to give? When's the last time you gave something up to give even beyond your ability? They also gave even though they were struggling financially themselves. Have you ever cut back on giving when times were hard, or used hard times as an excuse not to give at all for a while?

I testify that of their own free will they gave according to their ability. Ever give because it's your duty to give? Ever give because you were being pressured? With **overflowing joy** and **of their own free will** is way God desires it.

The way we give to the church is a sign of what's inside: **I do not say this as a command, but to test how genuine your love is.** Though it is strong, our giving is never perfect – not the joy, not the willingness, and not the generosity. And this exposes imperfect love for our gracious God, for the message of his love in Jesus that we work to proclaim.

But now I think back to that very clever fundraiser from Marquette. His argument was, basically: "You don't want to leave too much to your kids, or you'll wreck their goodness." I don't know if he honestly cared about the work ethic or the achievement of that alumnus' kids, or if he was just trying to get as much money from him as possible. But he did have a point. That's the danger in a lot of generous gifts, especially dropped on someone all at once. But here is also one more beautiful thing about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal wealth he became poor to give us: it has the exact opposite effect.

The Christian's richness from Jesus will not make her lazy or listless or aimless. The wealth we have been given by God's grace makes us more gracious in our own giving. Listen to how Paul describes the generosity of those Christians: **Now brothers, we want you to know about the grace of God that was given in the churches of Macedonia.** Those Christians took the grace of God into their hearts by faith, and that grace is what turned them into eager, joyful, generous givers. And it still works that way. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that although he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that

through his poverty you might become rich. You are rich forever, no matter how much money you have. Let your eternal wealth show in how you use your worldly wealth. If you have the widow's mite or the titan's billions, let the wealth of heaven you've been given show in how you give your wealth on earth. Amen.