

## A Wealth of Generosity?

### 2 Corinthians 8:1-9

Expanding Christ's Mission through Stewardship

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In one of Patrick O'Brian's tales of the British navy, a frigate captures several enemy ships and brings them back to port. Naval authorities meticulously calculate the value of the ships and their cargo, and then hand out prize money to the officers and crew. Ordinary seamen, poor as church mice, are now wealthy beyond imagining. And what do you suppose they will do with their newfound wealth? Put it in a savings account? Invest it on the London stock market? No, because these men will spend the rest of their lives on the ocean swabbing decks and furling and unfurling sails, they have no notion of retirement or of setting themselves up in business. The ship's surgeon, Stephen Maturin, spots some of them down at the harbor playing ducks and drakes, skipping silver coins on the shallow waters as little boys dive for the treasure, twenty, thirty, forty yards out in the bay. And now I quote: Looking with closer attention at the silvery gleam of the skipping missiles and at the frenzied diving of the little boys out in the noisome shallows, Stephen saw that the sailors were getting rid of their wealth in the most compendious manner known to man.

Compendious: do you know what that means? It's a long word that means short, concise, brief. Compendious means that the sailors weren't hesitating to toss away their treasure.

Something similar yet very different was going on among the Macedonian Christians. During a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. (2 Cor. 8:2) They too were being compendious, though they didn't have much money to give away. They displayed a wealth of generosity in a time of extreme poverty. But isn't Paul overstating the case here? Because aren't poverty and generosity polar opposites?

No, they are not. One of the finest meals I have ever eaten was in a poor home in Santa Rosa, Brazil. Santa Rosa is so remote that it has no telephones, so the four of us arrived without prior notice, just in time for Sunday dinner. Without hesitation Pedro and Joventina seated us at their tiny table. Joventina then ladled out the pork and rice she had been preparing on a wood-fired stove in the corner of the room. We used their only utensils while they stood and ate with their fingers the little that was left after serving us. A poor, struggling family, yet they overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

You don't have to be rich to be generous. In fact, being well off may be a hindrance. Perhaps you heard of the young man who tithed to his church when he started his business. It was tough, but he believed that giving 10% of his income was the right thing to do. And he kept on tithing until years later when his business prospered and he became wealthy. Then he went to his pastor and said, "Pastor, I can no longer give ten percent of my income; it was okay when I was poor but now ten per cent is just too much to give." "I'll pray for you," said the pastor. "You will?" "Oh yes. I'll pray that you become poor again."

I'm praying, not that we be poor or rich, but that in these adverse economic times, times not unlike those in ancient Macedonia, we may learn from our biblical brothers and sisters how to overflow in a wealth of generosity.

The first thing the Macedonians teach me is that generosity is rooted in the grace of God: We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia (vs. 1). And grace has been granted to us too, hasn't it? I didn't ask to be born in the United States of America with its grand freedoms and its marvelous opportunities instead of the Sudan with its poverty,

hunger, and civil unrest. I did not submit a request in triplicate to make Santa Barbara my hometown instead of Kabul or Baghdad. It was not because I am so deserving that doors opened to an ample education and an honorable career. And it was certainly not because you and I are such good people that Jesus, though he was rich, for our sakes became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich (v. 9). No, quite the contrary. We squandered our birthright in the far country of selfish desire, and when Jesus came to find us and bring us home to the Father's house, it was by grace and grace alone.

And, by that same grace, we are rich again, far richer than ever before. We are endowed with God's favor, God's love, God's salvation. Here's how Peter put it: You have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:4). This means that neither Croesus nor Bill Gates can hold a candle to the least affluent person in this sanctuary, for as a follower of Jesus Christ, you are heir to God's entire estate.

No wonder the Macedonians gave themselves first to the Lord (v.5). Before they put a dollar in the offering plate, they gave themselves first to the Lord. And when I know I am loved, loved unconditionally, loved eternally, loved to such an extent that God would name me one of his heirs, I can do no less than give myself, heart, soul, mind and body, to my benefactor. Then, when Christ occupies first place, I will not spend quite so much on trinkets and toys that eventually get thrown in the dumpster, and I will give more to ministries that bear eternal fruit. When Christ is first in my life, the first checks I write every month are to people who are doing Christ's work in the world, in my case to this church, to Presbyterian Border Ministry, and to a Christian college and three seminaries where I received my theological education.

What is the first check you write each month? That simple act says volumes about what or who is first in your life.

Kenneth Chafin tells of a missionary who was sharing the Gospel with the chief of a primitive tribe. The chief tried to impress the missionary with gifts of horses, blankets, and jewelry. The missionary replied, "My God does not want the chief's horses, blankets, and jewelry. My God wants the chief himself." The chief smiled and said, "You have a very wise God, for when I give him myself, he also gets horses, blankets, and jewelry." And when in gratitude, we give ourselves first to the Lord, he also gets our real estate, our investments, and our bank accounts.

What I'm about to say may provoke the officers of this church to put me on the next plane to Arizona, but I will say it anyway. This week you will receive in the mail a faith giving commitment card on which you may indicate what you will give to God through The National Presbyterian Church in 2003. Do not fill out this card . . . without first thanking Jesus Christ for becoming poor that you might become rich. Do not bring this card back to church next Sunday . . . without first giving yourself to Christ as Lord. Having said that, I do not fear a downturn in giving to The National Presbyterian Church. I am so confident of your devotion to Jesus Christ that I fully expect you to overflow in a wealth of generosity next Sunday.

And as for me... Arizona will just have to wait!