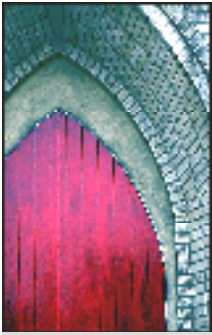


WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS-2

Begging For the Favor of Blessing Others...

TEXT: 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1-9 (ESV)



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A Perpetual Theme:

A year ago I preached a sermon with today's title—We Are The Champions. The idea then, as with today, was to encourage this body to be people who will own and become champions for the ministries the Lord calls us to. We read the story of the men who lowered their paralyzed friend down through a roof to get him to the feet of Jesus, that Jesus might heal him. This is a great image of being a champion for someone—doing for them what they can't, compensating for what they lack, owning their deepest needs as our own heartfelt desire.

We take up this theme again that we might turn once more to this call to give our lives away in service to Christ. Our text comes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Prior to this letter, Paul had written this church a much stronger one, a pastoral reprimand. That city and church were wealthy, but as so easily happens to churches in that position, they had begun to wander from the Gospel. So Paul sent Titus with a "severe letter," not knowing how he'd be received. But to Paul's great joy, Titus and the letter he carried were received not only with repentance, but also with an expressed deep affection for Paul. Paul then wrote 2 Corinthians to express his joy over their renewed obedience. As he comes to the end of the letter, he presents a need he wants this church to respond to. Their Christian brothers and sisters in Jerusalem were suffering under a great famine, ^(2 Cor 8:9) and Paul wants them to help—to take up a collection. But even more, he wants them to become champions for the church. So He tells them of another church they might emulate—the impoverished believers in Macedonia.

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

¹We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ²for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us. ⁶Accordingly, we urged Titus that as he had started, so he should complete among you this act of grace. ⁷But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you— see that you excel in this act of grace also. ⁸ I say this not as a command, but to prove by the earnestness of others that your love also is genuine. ⁹For 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.

The Anatomy of Generosity:

As long as the church exists, each member needs to serve. The church is meant to be light in a darkened world, bearing witness to the head of the Body, Jesus Christ. Each one of us, then, is called to this mission as members of Christ's Body. This means we need to be generous. But how might a people strapped for time and cash go about doing this? The word of God has much to say about generosity, and the principle of generosity that flows through the Bible is that it should not primarily be motivated by the overflow of resources, but by the overflow of the heart. Being a champion for a ministry in Christ's church requires generosity—not just of money, but of time and talent too. In fact, a church with 10 million dollars in the bank but no one to serve is a truly impoverished church. Paul here speaks of a rich church. In his description of the Macedonians, three points emerge—the context of their generosity, the resources behind their generosity and the motivation for their generosity.

THE CONTEXT OF THEIR GENEROSITY: The Macedonian churches (which include Philippi, home to Lydia and the Philippian Jailer) were suffering a "severe test of affliction." So the example of generosity Paul offers the Corinthians is of a people being tested to the limits. Not only were they facing persecution, we learn they were also extremely poor. And yet you can see the grace of God at work among them, because even in their affliction and poverty, they are abundantly joyful. In fact, look at how intentional Paul is to link their joy to their generosity... even in the face of poverty. He says, "*their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity.*" ^(v. 2) What a remarkable juxtaposition! How exceedingly generous it is when people give when they themselves are poor. This is the mark of grace—even when affliction is severe, joy is abundant.

Compare this to your context—or to the Corinthians. Often we won't serve until we're ready financially, or when our schedule opens up a bit more, or when we feel more emotionally or mentally prepared or physically adept. But the Macedonians, though they'd received the grace of God, God had not removed their poverty from them. John Piper explains, "The effect of God's grace is not first to remove affliction or first to remove poverty, but first to give abundant joy that overflows in wealth of generosity." The context of their generosity was that they gave in the midst of a very difficult time for themselves.

THE RESOURCES BEHIND THEIR GENEROSITY: In preparing for this message, I came across a passage John Calvin wrote hundreds of years ago, and I was struck by its timelessness. He wrote, "The thing that makes us more close fisted than we should be with our resources is that we are too careful to look too far forward at possible dangers that might come upon us and so become too cautious and anxious and work out too fretfully how much we are going to need during our whole life and how much we lose when the smallest part is taken away. But the man who depends on the Lord's blessing has his mind set free from these vexatious cares and at the same time has his hand set free for doing good to others." Of course we need to consider our resources before we determine what we can give. But how we decide what we actually need in life will determine how generous we are.

When we only give after we've ensured it will not be a strain on any of our present or future plans, where does our trust lie? What were the resources behind the Macedonian church's generosity? Paul tells us they gave "according to their means and beyond their means." (v. 3) In other words, they gave more than it appeared they could give. (v. 5) It was the kind of generosity that made folks wonder where it could possibly have come from. We're not talking today specifically of giving money but of investing personally in the church, whether through our time, talents or treasures. And I'm not advocating that we all drain away our retirement and savings to fund ministries. What I am asking is this: what would it look like in your life to give or serve out of your need rather than out of your abundance?

And let's not think this is one of God's parlor tricks either—that if we show ourselves generous in poverty the reward is that God will make us wealthy. Consider Jesus' parable of the widow leaving her two copper coins in the offering. (Mk 12:41-44) Jesus praised her for giving what amounted to a penny out of her need while everyone else was giving out of their abundance. But who among us would assume the moral to the story was that that the elderly woman would all of the sudden come upon a fortune in her old age as a reward for her generosity? No, the point was that she was already blessed because her generosity was not motivated by the abundance of her wealth, but by the abundance of her faith in God to care for her as she sought to care for others. Faith in God's goodness was the resource she & the Corinthians were tapping into as they gave.

THE MOTIVATION FOR THEIR GENEROSITY: The context of their generosity was poverty and affliction. The resource behind their generosity wasn't money. They had none. Rather, it was faith. So what was the motivation for their generosity? Paul says, they "begged us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints..." The Macedonians counted it **a favor** if Paul would let them help bring relief to their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The text suggests they came to Paul asking to help, he said something to the effect of, "You are afflicted and impoverished enough. Take care of yourselves." But they persisted.

Two things we pick up on here. **FIRST**, they approached Paul. He didn't approach them—meaning they took the initiative to bring up the need they recognized themselves. They did not wait to be asked. **SECOND**, there were a myriad of factors that would have made this kind of help feel "unnatural." They were Gentiles while the believers in Jerusalem were mostly Jews. They were hundreds of miles away. They themselves were poor and afflicted. And yet despite the factors, they took the initiative because they understood that it was a blessed life to serve in the name of Christ.

And look at how they understood what serving Christ was. Paul doesn't say they gave their resources to Jerusalem. He says they gave **themselves** to the **Lord**. That's what serving the church is—giving yourself to the Lord. And it was unthinkable to them that anyone would prevent them from doing this. They would have been robbed of a blessing had Paul refused their support. But then notice too that in giving themselves to God, they did so by **then** giving themselves to the apostles—meaning however they could serve, they would. It is a privilege to serve Christ by caring for His church. Our motivation for generosity ought to be a desire to give ourselves away to God—to seek the kind of union and closeness with Him that only comes through giving our lives away for the sake of His kingdom. We should count it a favor to us when we're given the opportunity to serve His church, because we are serving Him when we do!

Not Asking for a Personal Favor:

We're not unlike the Corinthians. They were strong—which I believe Oak Hills is by God's grace. They excelled in faith, speech, earnestness, and knowledge—all of which I've seen here. But Paul was nudging them to show that wherever they're blessed, it's because they're a church that loves well. He tells them, "excel in this act of grace also (serving to poor in Jerusalem)... to prove your love also is genuine..." (vs. 7-8) Love must drive us.

As long as the Lord sustains this local church, we'll need everyone serving in one way or another. We'll never be a church that builds up programs just to say we have lots of programs—and the reason is because the energy the people of this church have to give is such a precious resource that we don't want to waste any of it. But even without lots of bells and whistles, our needs are great. And they always will be.

Nursery and children's ministries grow continually. We've seen so many babies born in the past few years, and so many other new children coming with new families. Children's ministries are areas where you can become a champion simply by regarding it as an ongoing need to be met and by keeping your name on the volunteer lists. We also need singers, musicians and people who can help set up and run sound in this glorious yet cavernous room. We need people to help set this tabernacle up every Sunday and then take it back down again.

We need people to assume the responsibility of the coffee and donut table—which is about **so much more** than sugar and caffeine. Since we only come together once a week, the 20 minutes after the service, where this sanctuary transforms into a fellowship hall, have been vital beyond what we could calculate regarding the building of relationships. That table helps. We need prayer warriors. We need older men to disciple younger men, older women to disciple younger women. We need people to faithfully give of their time **and** their treasures. Perhaps there are needs you perceive that have not yet been a part of this church. If so, is the Lord calling you to champion that ministry? Let's talk about that. Our needs are great because our mission is of eternal consequence.

That said, even though our needs are great, the depth of our provision in Christ is even greater. Consider what He has given already—Himself. Paul says it this way in vs 9: "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." He has made us rich indeed. Materially speaking, we have so much more than the Macedonians, who gave themselves away. Even more than the Corinthians had. But even that is not what makes us rich in Christ. Our abundant wealth comes from being heirs of God through the grace of Christ our Lord!

When leaders in the church ask people to be generous, we're not asking for a personal favor. Its never, "Hey, could you help me out." Because it is not the leaders you serve. It is Christ the Lord! Serving the church so that she might carry out her mission to know and make known the astonishing grace of God is a call every single believer shares. Some serve out of plenty, others beyond our means, but we're all called to serve. So may Christ give you love overflowing into generosity. "Joy is rooted in grace, not in freedom from affliction." (John Piper) So may your joy to serve not come from a manageable life, but from a life set free in Christ to serve and glorify His name in plenty and in want. And may you come to beg for this favor of blessing others!