

Devotion #1 – 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 “Strive to Excel”

This is the fourth and final week of our sermon series called Joyful Generosity. Week 1 we were reminded that everything we have, including our very life, belongs to God and as a gift of his love he allows us to manage his stuff for a time on this earth. Week 2 we were reminded that when we count our blessings, making sure to include the gift of our Savior Jesus in the mix, we have a God who has blessed us abundantly! Week 3 we were encouraged to make Jesus our greatest treasure so that our heart and actions fall into a God pleasing place. Today, week 4, God focuses our attention on some practical advice on how we, as Christians, can be Joyfully Generous with offerings of our time, talents, and money. First, let’s consider 2 Corinthians 8:1-9.

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. ⁵ And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will. ⁶ So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. ⁷ But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. ⁸ I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. ⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

(Show cartoon with young boy giving his father his report card and telling him that he had lowered his expectations concerning his grades). Do we ever do this – lowering our expectations on how we use the many blessings that God has given to us? Whenever we do that or are tempted to do that let us remember this: **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”** (vs. 7). Where would you and I be without God’s love in our lives? The answer is that we would be in the same place that millions of people around the world are right now. We would be living our lives without any real purpose in life at all. We would be trying to be somebody by trying to make a name for ourselves. We would be checking Facebook every 10 minutes to see how many likes we have on our posts looking for a

little self esteem. We would be looking back on all the sins we are guilty of with no relief for our guilty consciences. We would come to the end of our life terrified at what is coming next. Yet that's not the case for us. Jesus excelled in giving us his best in life and in death so that we have a name – God's child. If God had a refrigerator, our picture and a list of our good deeds would be proudly displayed. We have peace in our hearts and confidence as we face death and judgment day. And we have a purpose for living – **“to excel in the grace of giving.”** Whether it's church things, or home things, or work things, or community things – God created us to excel in generous and joyful giving of our time, talents, and money. God doesn't want us to run away from those opportunities – he wants us to embrace them and to consider it a privilege. God wants us to learn from others, like the Macedonian Christians, what it means to excel in the grace of giving – that it involves making some joyful sacrifices. In a kind, loving, encouraging parental way God wants you and me to know that he didn't create us to excel in excuse making, but rather he created us to **“excel in the grace of giving.”** Motivated by God's love to us through Jesus let us strive to live up to God's expectations of us. Let's strive **“to excel in the grace of giving”** and then see how God will bless us and others for doing so.

Devotion #2 – Deuteronomy 26:1-11 “God First”

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, ² take some of the firstfruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name ³ and say to the priest in office at the time, “I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us.” ⁴ The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. ⁵ Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: “My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. ⁶ But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. ⁷ Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. ⁸ So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. ⁹ He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; ¹⁰ and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.” Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. ¹¹ And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household.

As we strive to “**excel in the grace of giving**” God gives us some practical advice on how to do that with the “Firstfruits” principle. God doesn’t ask us to give him all of our time, talents, and money, but he does ask us to give to him first to support causes that God deems most important. (Show picture of baby saying “Mine!”) But what about the house payment, car payment, school payment, food, utilities, gas, and all the other bills? I worked hard for what I have. What about my me time to rest and relax so I can recharge my batteries? Whenever Old Testament Israel would give to God first it was an act of faith. “I trust you God that if I give to you first you will provide more so that I can take care of my needs.” When we give to God first it is the same act of faith – “I trust you God that you will provide more to cover my needs.” God first. Why? Can’t I give to God at the end after I’ve taken care of everything else? No, because God knows sinful humans well. How much time and energy do you have at the end of each day or week for the things God prioritizes? How much money do you have at the end of the week or month to help those less fortunate than you both spiritually and physically? God doesn’t ask us to give him all of our time, talents, and money, but he does ask us to give to him first to support causes that God deems most important. God first because God deserves better than our leftovers. God never gave us his leftovers. He gave us his firstfruits and he gave us his best as he gave us his son Jesus to be our Savior. Jesus, the innocent Son of God, suffered Hell and died. Why? Because he put our eternal salvation first in his life. For every time that you and I have put ourselves first, Jesus said, “You first!” when he died on the cross to forgive our sins. God invented the phrase “You first!” So have can we not say to God, “when it comes to my time, my talents, my money – You first. My Best!”

Devotion #3 – 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 “My Best Regular Intentional Plan”

Now about the collection for God’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

The Apostle Paul was collecting money from the Gentile Christians so that he could take it back to Jerusalem to help the Jewish Christians that needed help. This offering would help to unite the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians around their common Savior Jesus. A worthy cause no doubt, but a cause that would have gone unfulfilled had those Gentile Christians not followed Paul’s God inspired advice to have a plan when it came to their giving. There are a lot of good causes in this world worthy of our time, talents, and money. But unless we have a plan to support them, then our support will most likely be nothing more than good intentions unfulfilled. Ben Franklin once said, “If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail.” If we are going to excel in God first and best giving, then we need a plan. And that plan to use our time, talents, and money should include three elements – it’s regular, it’s intentional, and it’s proportional in comparison to how God has blessed us. Regular and intentional needs no

explanation, but maybe just a thought on proportional. God doesn't tell New Testament Christians how much time, talents, and money to give in support of God's priorities. God doesn't tell you to give exactly like your neighbor, although it's never wrong to strive to follow good examples. God wants you and me to make plans about our giving that flow from a joy filled and generous heart of faith and a plan that is based upon how much God has blessed us. God doesn't bless everyone the same. God didn't bless King David the same as he blessed the widow from Luke 21. But God was pleased with the offerings of both, David's 5 billion- dollar gift to build the temple and the two small copper coins that the widow brought to support the work of the church. God was pleased with both gifts because they came from joy filled and generous hearts of faith and both gifts were in proportion to how God had blessed them. Everyone has been blessed by God to give something. Just imagine the impact we could have if together all of us were striving to excel in the grace of giving; if all of us were striving to be God first, my best; if all of us had a regular, intentional, and proportional plan for our time, talent, and money offerings. God had a generous plan to save us. His name was Jesus. Beyond that God has blessed each of us with varying amounts of time, talents, and money. In response to God's generosity to us, let each of us be joyfully generous in return. Amen.