

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.

¹⁰ And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. ¹¹ Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. ¹² For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have. (2 Corinthians 8:1-12)

God Enables us to Excel in the Grace of Giving

Almost every summer, here in the Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, we have a district convention. I've been in the ministry now for more than twenty years, so I've gone to lots of those conventions. I certainly don't get excited about it anymore. But it was very different when I went to my first convention. I wasn't a pastor yet. I had just gotten out of the army and in the fall I was going back to college to study for the ministry. So my pastor asked me to go as our congregation's lay delegate. It was a wonderful experience. I wish I could recapture the excitement I felt then about doing something that has become routine for me today. For me, a huge part of that excitement was seeing so many people who cared about the things I cared about. For four years in the army, it often seemed like I was the only WELS member around. So it was moving for me to be surrounded by a couple of hundred people who were there because they loved the Lord and wanted to be faithful to the gospel.

At those conventions you get a bird's eye view of everything we're trying to do as a church body. You see that Peace is not alone in this work. We're part of a worldwide fellowship of believers and God has given us a mission: to proclaim the gospel. But doing that takes resources. It takes people and labor and yes, money. Where do those resources come from? Finally, God gives them. But he doesn't just drop them out of heaven. He hasn't sunk an oil well in the basement of the synod headquarters that provides the money we need. God hides himself behind us. He provides the manpower and the financial resources through members of Lutheran churches all over this country. God works through you and me. His work begins in our hearts. **God enables us to excel in the grace of giving.**

I.

God makes us overflow in his grace. St. Paul said, **“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.”** The Greek word translated here as “excel” really means to overflow. In this case, the grace that he makes overflow is the desire to give to his work. God makes that happen in our hearts. He has to do that because we human beings are selfish by nature. A couple of months ago, I overheard one of our teachers explaining fractions to her class. She told them that if they had a cookie or a birthday treat and they had to share it with their brothers and sisters, they wouldn't want to get the smallest piece. They would make it as even as possible so they got their share. That's the way the human heart works. We don't want to give any more than we have to. We believers wrestle with those feelings, too. We pass people on the side of the road who are begging for money. When we don't give them anything, we feel bad afterwards and we try to justify it to ourselves. When it comes to our support for our congregation and for preaching the gospel throughout the world, we do the math. “If I give a hundred dollars to church today, that's a hundred dollars I won't have to buy groceries or put gas in the car.” We forget God's promises to take care of us when we are generous with

him and we rifle through our wallet looking for the smallest bill we can give. Then we feel guilty afterwards, but again, our main way of dealing with those feelings is to rationalize them: there are a lot of other people in this church, they can give too.

But does that really work? Every time we engage in that conversation in our own minds, we're showing that our conscience doesn't approve of whatever we did or didn't do. We're showing that we know that the natural tendency of the human heart is to put me first and then give God the leftovers. That is just sin. God tells us to give him the firstfruits. Our offerings should come right off the top. Now, God doesn't expect us to give more than he has given us, but he does command us to give in proportion to his blessings. How many of us actually do that?

By nature – that is, the way we're born – we're all greedy and selfish. That sin deserves God's punishment in hell. But generous givers aren't born. They're reborn. They are the work and product of the Holy Spirit. That work begins with Jesus. Jesus was the most giving person who ever lived. St. Paul tells us, **“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.”** How many of us would make ourselves poor to help strangers? It's one thing to give a couple bucks to that homeless person by the side of the road. But would you sell your house and empty your savings account and your retirement funds and cash in your insurance policies and give it all to him? Or to homeless shelter? Or to the church? Not one of us would do that. And God does not ask us to.

But that's exactly what Jesus did. He was rich beyond our wildest imagination. He owned the entire universe as the Son of God in heaven. And he gave it all up to come down here and live as the child of a poor carpenter, to grow up in a world where ordinary people had one set of clothes and their cloak was both their coat and their blanket. He lived a life that was poor even by that world's standards, without a home, without real income, dependent on the charity of others. He gave himself for us. He was perfect in his generosity in our place. Then he died and he paid for all our greed and selfishness and excuses, and for all the times we gave God the leftovers. Jesus died and he paid for all our sin. Then he rose to tell us that his perfect life and his innocent death count for us. We are now perfect and generous in God's eyes. That's grace. It's a gift God gave us.

And he wasn't done when he gave us that gift. God taught us what Jesus did. The Holy Spirit gave us faith so now, we trust him to get us home to heaven and to care for us here in this life. You know what? Whenever God gives that gift of faith, he gives more gifts to go along with it. He gives us love for each other. He gives us fellowship with Christians who encourage us in our faith. And he does give us the desire to give back to him, to share in the ministry here and throughout the world. He works in us and gives grace that overflows in generous offerings to the Lord and to those in need around us.

That work is going on in your heart. Now, it's not always easy to see, because you are really two people. You're a believer and you're a sinner, an unbeliever. The believer in you wants to give your whole life to Jesus and wants to be generous with the Lord because God has been so generous with you. But that unbeliever doesn't want to give God one red cent. He's the reason this is so hard. He's the part of you that makes up all the excuses and works overtime to silence your conscience. If it were up to you and me to beat him by ourselves, we wouldn't stand a chance. But we aren't by ourselves. We have the grace of God overflowing into our hearts every single day. Every time we hear that Jesus loved us, that he died for us, that he has forgiven us and walks with us and cares for us and listens to our prayers, the Holy Spirit strengthens that believer to fight back and live for Christ. And a part of that living for Christ is the generosity of spirit that Paul is talking about today. The Christians in Corinth had the gift of wanting to give. God will give us that gift, too, through the gospel.

II.

It's hard for us to think of giving up our time and our income as a blessing. The whole idea that wanting to do that is a grace, a gift that God gave me, is a little out of the box. But that's exactly what God teaches us. Giving isn't about me twisting your arm until you're generous. It's about God changing your heart and making it line up with his. When he does that, you and I want what he wants. Sometimes, it's confusing to see what God wants, so he helps us by giving us examples of other Christians who truly live that way. **God enables us to excel in the grace of giving. He encourages us through our fellowship.**

St. Paul pointed to the example of the Macedonian churches. Corinth, where the people who got this letter lived, was a prosperous port city. It was kind of the New York of the ancient world. Macedonia was a backwater. There wasn't a lot of money there. The church members were poor. Yet, they begged Paul to let them participate in a special offering he was collecting. There was a famine in Jerusalem. Paul was collecting money to feed the people there. Those poor Christians in the backwater of Macedonia wanted to participate. In fact, Paul says, **"They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability."**

And then he says, **"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."** What does he mean by that? Well, when we sinners do give, there is always this temptation to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves on how well we're doing. Pride ruins our gift in God's eyes. But that's not what happened here. They gave themselves first to the Lord. Their generosity was truly a fruit of their faith.

Do we have that desire? Do we want to be generous? Do we give ourselves first to the Lord? If we don't, we need to go to the cross of Christ and confess our sin and failure and know that his blood covers that sin. Then we can look at those examples as something to strive for. The New Testament often talks about modeling the Christian life. God gives every congregation mature believers who show the way to live for Jesus. We've all known those people. We admired the way they stood firm in suffering and the confession they made. We were inspired by their warmth and love. We noticed how generous they were with their time, how ready to listen and encourage us. And we learned something about Christian faith and life from their example.

The same is true about giving. It is part of our life of faith to give back to the Lord. There are Christians here who do it generously, although we don't always know that because we don't shine a spotlight on who gives what. But people who study giving patterns in churches often talk about the 80/20 rule. What is that? Twenty percent of the congregation gives eighty percent of the offerings. That's definitely true here. In fact, it might be closer to a 90/10 rule. Now, I don't say that to make you feel guilty, but rather to point out that we do have models of Christian faith and charity among us. God is blessing our congregation. All of us can benefit from seeing that model of Christian love and generosity which does exist among us.

There is a need for that generosity. Last November, we saw a WELS Connection video about a special offering the synod is taking to retire its debt. If we can eliminate that debt, the money that goes to servicing it can be used to reach out with the gospel now. This morning, the offering envelopes for that gift are in your bulletins. I would encourage you all to pray about it and consider a special gift to the Lord. Here at Peace, we are going through a period of transition as we issue calls for new teachers. Part of that transition is going to the need to increase our staffing. That is going to cost money. But it is the cost of operating this kind of ministry in the US today. Think carefully about that need and about how God has blessed you.

My friends, give yourselves to the Lord. Jesus is your Savior who gave everything to save you. Be his in your words and actions, in your thoughts and feelings. Grow in your faith by hearing and studying the gospel and make a commitment to serving the Lord. Serve him with your time and your talents. Serve him with your witness in the world. Serve him by being good parents and loving children, by loving your spouse, by being faithful workers and good neighbors. And give careful thought to how God has blessed you financially and serve the Lord with a generous heart and gift to him. He promises you that you cannot give him more than he will give you. Trust him and be generous. Amen.