

Rev. Dr. Craig Howard
“Enough”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, June 27, 2021

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter, I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’

I must admit to you that when Bill said that I was going to preach about money, I just heard pocketbooks, close, and people put their hands in their pocket. Oh, no. It's not going to be that bad. It's a blessing to be able to be here with you this morning. And as I've said already, to be here live. Now during my life as an insurance agent, I was very competitive. When my manager wanted me to have more sales, he would simply say, "Look at agent so-and-so. He has 50 cars this month. Are you going to let him beat you?" No, no. And I'm out the door trying to sell more policies. I'm still kind of competitive, I must admit.

Now, the background of Second Corinthians is seen in those first four verses of Chapter 8, well, Paul is sharing, or he's really kind of bragging about the churches in Macedonia. He's telling the Corinthians that when the churches in Macedonia found out that Paul was raising money for the impoverished members of the Church of Jerusalem, they jumped at a chance to be involved. In fact, Paul says that they gave beyond what they had. Even though the Macedonians were experiencing hardship and poverty, they found a way to help someone else. They found a way to be a blessing to others. Why is Paul telling the Macedonia story to the Corinthian church? Perhaps Paul is saying to the Corinthian church, "Look at the Macedonian church; look how much they gave. Don't let them beat you. So what are you going to do? You promised last year that you were going to participate in this fundraiser. Now's the time to put your money where your mouth is." Well, that's what I would have done. Well, another way. He instead takes a theological approach. He decides to instruct the Corinthian church in a way that I believe is helpful to them and helpful to Kirkwood and helpful to all churches.

Paul talks about the grace of giving. The grace of giving, he says, "Now, as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech and knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you, so we want you to excel also in this grace." Grace. Grace, by definition, means something that we are given that we don't deserve. It means something we get to partake of or participate in

that we did not earn. Grace is connected to Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate provider Paul talks of how Jesus was wealthy, but He gave up everything for our salvation. In the book of Philippians, chapter two, Paul writes, "Though Jesus was in the form of God, He did not consider being equal with God something to exploit, but He emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When He found himself in the form of a human, Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even the death on the cross."

Paul is saying that before coming to Earth, Jesus, as the son of God, had all the wealth and glory of heaven, and He let it go. Instead, Jesus emptied himself into humanity. Jesus suffered and died on the cross so that we can have eternal life. Jesus poured himself into His life as a lowly carpenter son, and died naked and poor on the cross, so that we may live in God's abundance. Jesus emptied himself of His heavenly power and place as God's son, so that we can have a chance at eternal life. This is the grace that we have been given, the undeserved gift from God that we can now have peace with God, have peace with one another. And this is the grace Paul is challenging the church in Corinth to excel in. He wants them to excel in letting go. Letting go, empty their pockets, pouring out the contents of their purses.

When we receive God's grace in baptism, God puts a claim on our lives. We [all?] no longer belong to ourselves. We now belong to God. We are challenged to live, and to our baptism, and excel in the grace that has been given to us. Paul wants the Corinthian church to live in God's freedom. Freedom to be generous and give of their tithe, and their talents, and their treasure. Give so that others who are poor and less fortunate may be blessed. Paul uses the story of the manna from heaven to illustrate what it means to be generous and free.

It's a story that you all heard in Sunday school, as kids. It's a story of the people of Israel going through the desert after being delivered from slavery in Egypt. Although, they had been physically made free, their hearts and their [mines?] were still captive in fear of scarcity. They had been released from the bondage of chains and slavery, but their hearts were still bound in insecurity and lack of trust. When they complained to Moses about food, God provided by sending them manna from heaven. This bread-like substance would appear in the mornings, and they were told to only collect what you need for the day. But sure enough, some of those folks took more than a day's worth, and by the next day it had spoiled and rotted. They could have limit themselves to a day's ration. They did not believe that one day's provision was enough.

I've shared this story with you before from John Bogle, the creator of Vanguard Mutual Funds, but it bears repeating. He writes, "At a party given by a billionaire on Shelter Island, Kurt Vonnegut informs his pal Joseph Heller that their host, who is a hedge fund manager, had made more money in a single day than Heller had earned from his wildly popular book, *Catch 22*." Heller responded, "Yes, but I have something he will never have, enough. Enough." It is a word that's difficult for us today even as followers of Jesus Christ. We live in a culture of consumption and consumerism. One of the most difficult lines in the Lord's Prayer is, "Give us this day, our daily bread." In fact, it's not enough to have today's bread, we need tomorrow's bread and next week's bread, too. And while we're at it, we need next month's bread and next year's bread. And we need to have enough bread to live well into our old age. When we look into our savings accounts and our investment funds, instead of seeing the balance and feeling secure, we feel fear, and doubt, and stress, and anxiety, and worry that we do not have enough and that we will not make it. It doesn't matter if we've earned 1% or 31%, it's never enough. The same applies to our time, we try to squeeze 26 hours into a 24-hour day. Some of us even work in our sleep. Vacations are stressful because we're pressure to relax. We look toward retirement and forward to the day when we can finally volunteer to our heart's desire only to find our schedule so full, we need a vacation from retirement. We must learn to trust. I believe Jesus wants us to have a new vision. Instead of seeing scarcity, see enough. We don't have to do it all. We don't have to have it all. We can trust others and we can trust God. God cares for us. God will be there for us tomorrow and the next day and the next month and the next year. The Lord will provide. Have I ever told you the story about my bird feeders? This is a good one. Well, really, they're squirrel feeders. No matter what I've tried, I can't keep the squirrels out of the bird feeders. So I tried a new tactic this year. I

have a platform just for the squirrels. I put corn in and other squirrel food on the platform. When they eat it, I make sure I replace it. I want the squirrels to know that I'm not going to let them go hungry. I'm going to make sure that they have enough food to eat. I'm going to make sure that they have enough. But it hasn't worked. If you know anything, you know what's coming. The squirrels will eat their food and the birds' food. It's not that they don't have enough. It's because their appetite is insecure. They're eating out of fear and scarcity. We can be like the squirrels sometimes, but we must remind ourselves sometimes daily that God will provide our daily bread and that what we have is enough. Then we can let our resources go and share them with others, then we can empty our pockets and support those who cannot help themselves, then we can turn our pocketbooks and pour over and pour out the contents and excel and the grace of giving.

As I drove up to the church today, there is nothing about this building that speaks of stinginess or a reluctance of giving. Look at these beautiful stains. Look at these pipes on this organ, the classrooms, the staff offices, look at the talent, the musicians, pastors that you have here. Everything in this church points to an abundant God who was able to do above what we could ask or think. There's a story about a Stewardship Committee chairperson who visits an infamous miser. "Sir," the woman said to him, "Our records show that despite your wealth, you've never given once to the church." "Do your records show that I have an elderly mother who was left penniless when my father died? Do your records show that I have a disabled brother who cannot find work? Do your records show that I have a sister who's a widow with two small children and can hardly make ends meet?" She [inaudible]. The woman said, "No. No, sir. Our records do not show that." He said, "I don't give to them either. So what makes you think I'm going to give to you?" Kirkwood is not a church of misers and penny pinchers. You are a church that is blessed and you are being a blessing to others. And I encourage you to continue in your generosity, pray daily, and thankfulness to God that you have been provided with enough. Continue to volunteer for mission opportunities. Keep working in the community garden. Keep supporting the St. Joseph Housing Initiative and room at the end. Pour out your heart of love into the community of Kirkwood and surrounding areas. Be generous in your financial giving as well. And by doing so, you support the great ministry and you become a blessing to others in need. Amen.