

“The Grace of Giving”

II Corinthians 8:1-7

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It is one of those phrases that grabs your attention, at least it did mine. Paul encouraged the Corinthian Christians to **“excel in this grace of giving”** II Corinthians 8:7. Sounds to me like a challenge and a reprimand. Let me explain.

Paul was trying to raise money for the needy Christians in Jerusalem. He knew the Corinthians had resources to share that would help these struggling believers. However, he also knew that the Corinthians were not noted for their generosity. As a matter of fact, the opposite was true.

To encourage the Corinthians to be more generous, Paul cited the unselfish nature of the Macedonian Christians. Macedonia was Corinth’s northern neighbor. The churches at Philippi and Thessalonica were there.

The Christians in this region were unbelievably generous and it was certainly not because they were wealthy. To the contrary, the Christians in Macedonia were particularly poor. If Corinth represented the wealth of Buckhead, pockets of Macedonia epitomized the poverty of some of the inner city communities.

And yet, even though the Christians in Macedonia were undergoing severe trials and living in poverty, they were neither bitter nor selfish. To the contrary, they were filled with joy and very generous. When it appeared that Paul was not even going to ask the Macedonian Christians to help with this offering because they were so poor, they begged for the opportunity to give. Then, they gave an amount that staggered Paul. He could not believe their generosity. They gave more than anyone could have ever expected or envisioned. We don’t know the amount they gave, but whatever it was it overwhelmed Paul. That’s why he used their gift as an example of generosity before the Corinthians.

It was at this point in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians that he challenged them to **“see that you also excel in this grace of giving.”** The Macedonians had. Now it was their turn.

See why I think it was both a challenge and a reprimand? Paul chose his words carefully and accomplished both at the same time.

“See that you also excel at this grace of giving.” I like that. It implies that the Corinthians excelled at some things and they did. They excelled in faith, speech, knowledge, sincerity and love. Something was missing, though, and it was very important. They needed to excel in the grace of giving. They needed to become excellent givers and so do we.

Why do we need to excel in the grace of giving? There are two reasons I’ll mention today. **First of all, we need to be unselfish because it is the key to happiness.** I believe that with all my heart.

I like what Solomon wrote in Proverbs 22:9, “A generous man will himself be blessed for he shares his food with the poor.” That’s reminiscent of Jesus’ words in Acts 20:35, “It is more blessed to give than receive.”

I don’t deny that it is fun to be self-indulgent. We’ve all done it, haven’t we? Perhaps you have eaten far more than you should have or shopped until you dropped and had fun doing it. That’s human nature.

However, that level of happiness is so shallow, superficial and fleeting. As a matter of fact, it takes bigger buffets and more possessions to feed that addiction and each high lasts a little less than the last one.

So what is the alternative? What brings real joy into our lives that quenches the deepest thirst? **“See that you also excel in this grace of giving.”** There’s the answer. It is in giving that we receive the greatest joy.

Let me share a story from my daughter's childhood. When Amy turned seven, she received about twenty dollars from friends along with other presents. Jackie and I talked to her about what she was going to do with her money.

"I want to buy a pair of skates, a cabbage patch doll, a new bicycle and lots of candy. Do I have enough money?" she replied.

We let her down easily but told her that she did not have enough money to fulfill all her fantasies. We then shared with her our philosophy of money management.

"If the money were mine," Jackie said, "I would give two dollars to the church, put one-half in savings and spend the other half on something I had been wanting for a long time."

Amy looked disappointed. "Give two dollars to the church? Why? Will I ever get it back?" I'll never forget Jackie's answer. She calmly looked at Amy and said, "No, Amy, you will not get it back but you will get far more than two dollars could buy."

What an answer! That was powerful. I would never have thought to say that and yet truer words were never spoken. When we give we receive far more than we could buy with the same amount of money.

The second reason we need to "excel at the grace of giving" is because there is so much good we can do with our resources. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to see how their money could be used to help the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. Their money could mean the difference between life and death for some of their fellow believers. Ours can, too.

Wealth is not a sin but it is a great responsibility. Our resources can be used to help feed the hungry, clothe the poor, house the homeless, heal the sick, comfort the grieving, encourage the discouraged, educate young ministers, print Bibles, build churches and spread the Gospel. What a difference an unselfish person can make in this world. How tragic when he or she does not.

How does a person "excel at the grace of giving?" How does a person excel at anything? It requires a lot of desire, discipline, determination and practice.

I have never known a champion athlete that succeeded without these traits. If all four are not present, success will not be achieved.

Quarterback Tony Rice led Notre Dame's football team to a national championship in 1988. Before the season, sportswriters wondered whether Notre Dame could win the championship with Rice, whose passing skill was often in question. What they did not know was that Lou Holtz bought Rice a dart board and instructed him to throw darts for an hour a day. Rice did not see how that would help his game but did as his coach said. It wasn't long before Rice was throwing the football with much more accuracy and confidence, both of which were evidenced in the 1997-98 season.

Ted Williams, the baseball superstar of the 1940's and 50's, was known as a "natural hitter." When asked about that, he replied, "There is no such thing as a natural born hitter. I became a good hitter because I paid the price of constant practice, constant practice."

How does a person excel at the grace of giving? Constant practice, constant practice.